

Il Regno di Sicilia in età normanna e sveva

Forme e organizzazioni della cultura e della politica

a cura di
Pietro Colletta, Teofilo De Angelis,
Fulvio Delle Donne



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RODNEY LOKAJ

Clare the Epistolographer against Church and Empire *stupenda paupertas vs stupor mundi*

A tradition of misogynistic, historiographical bias has assumed Clare of Assisi to have been a demure and rather unimaginative handmaid or *plantula* tenderly nurtured by Francis for the Lord's garden¹. And yet the Poverello's death in 1226² did

¹ All primary Franciscan sources are taken from *Fontes Franciscani*, edd. E. Menestò, S. Brufani, Santa Maria degli Angeli, Assisi 1995.

1ECl = *Epistola ad Sanctam Agnetem de Praga I*, in *Fontes cit.*, pp. 2261-2266.

2ECl = *Epistola ad Sanctam Agnetem de Praga II*, in *Fontes cit.*, pp. 2267-2272.

3ECl = *Epistola ad Sanctam Agnetem de Praga III*, in *Fontes cit.*, pp. 2273-2278.

4ECl = *Epistola ad Sanctam Agnetem de Praga IV*, in *Fontes cit.*, pp. 2279-2284.

2EFi = *Epistola ad fideles (recensio prior)* in *Fontes cit.*, pp. 71-76.

EOrd = *Epistola toti Ordini missa*, in *Fontes cit.*, pp. 97-104.

LegCl = *Legenda s. Clarae Assisiensis*, in *Fontes cit.*, pp. 2401-2450.

PrCa = *Process of Canonisation of Clair of Assisi*, in *Fontes cit.*, pp. 2453-2508.

ReCl = *Regula s. Clarae*, in *Fontes cit.*, pp. 2289-2307.

RnBu = *Regula non bullata*, in *Fontes cit.*, pp. 183-212.

² For an overview of the recent critical literature in Italian regarding Leo's role in Clare's life after Francis's death, especially his possible presence at Saint Damian's as Clare's chaplain and assistant letter-writer, cfr. E. Paoli, *Introduzione*, in *Fontes cit.*, pp. 2221-2260, at pp. 2251-2252; F. Accrocca, *The 'Unlettered One' and His Witness: Footnotes to a Recent Volume on the Autographs of Brother Francis and Brother Leo*, «Greyfriars Review», 16/3 (2002), p. 278; A. Bartoli Langelì, *Gli autografi di frate Francesco e di frate Leone*, Turnhout 2000; T.J. Johnson, *Clare, Leo, and the Authorship of the Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague*, «Franciscan Studies», 62 (2004), pp. 91-100, partic. pp. 98-99. For the 'true revolution' in studies on Clare, that is, a list of the

not leave that sapling simply to wither and die. To the contrary, for almost thirty more years, though certainly ailing in body and largely left to her own devices, opposed by both the Curia Romana and the male branch of her own Franciscan Order, she flourished in intellect while managing St Damian's, propounding Francis' ideal of poverty declined in the feminine, and spreading that model throughout Italy and quite beyond³. She did so by turning to epistolography. Likewise taken at face value to be rather simple, indeed anti-intellectual, the four extant letters to Agnes of Prague were actually imbued with a highly sophisticated, codified form of *minoritas* and *humilitas* whose function was two-fold. On the one hand, the sufficiently unassuming and overtly deferent form therein was meant to deflect the attention of all filtering agencies in order to assure the greatest possibility of effective transmission and survival. On the other, that form was also sufficiently robust to encrypt certain messages and ensure that the same might reach their illustrious addressee. So adroit and clever, in fact, was Clare in camouflaging this deeper layer that it was not until padre Pozzi first embarked on his groundbreaking philological deconstruction of her writing style that it became apparent that this more sophisticated level existed at all. Both the «exceptional understanding of prose construction»⁴

rhetorical and historical aspects of recent research together with the «methodologically incontestable philological note» (my trans.), cfr. E. Menestò, *Lo stato attuale degli studi su Chiara d'Assisi*, in *Clara Claris Praeclara. Ricerche dell'Istituto Teologico e dell'Istituto di Scienze religiose di Assisi. Atti del Convegno Internazionale Clara Claris Praeclara L'esperienza cristiana e la memoria di Chiara d'Assisi in occasione del 750° anniversario della morte, Assisi 20-22 novembre 2003*, Santa Maria degli Angeli, Assisi 2004 (from now on *Clara Claris*), pp. 1-26, partic. p. 3.

³ On Clare's unbending tenacity, cfr. G. Casagrande, *La Regola di Innocenzo IV*, in *Clara Claris*, pp. 71-82, partic. p. 79, and C. Frugoni, *Una solitudine abitata. Chiara d'Assisi*, Roma - Bari 2006, p. 38.

⁴ Chiara d'Assisi, *Lettere ad Agnese. La visione dello specchio*, cur. G. Pozzi, B. Rima, Milano 1999 (from now on Pozzi & Rima), pp. 51-52; A. Rotzetter, *Chiara d'Assisi. La prima francescana*, Milano 1993 (ed. or. *Klara von Assisi. Die erste franziskanische Frau*, Freiburg 1993), pp. 241, 369. Cfr. also R.J. Armstrong, *The Lady: Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, New York 2006 (edd. or. 1988, 1993), pp. 28-29.

and the «steadfast, burning» style⁵ of the Clarian letters, he exclaimed, concealed a «veritable treasure trove»⁶ laden with multiple «richiami occulti»⁷, hidden allusions eagerly waiting to be skillfully detected and duly appreciated. Indeed, these letters can now be better understood not only as a discreet way of coaxing Agnes on in her battle against Frederick II, but also as the training ground for her ultimate triumph over the cardinalate in the subtle, yet authoritative, rhetoric of monastic dictate, the Clarian Rule. How brother Leo or *alii* had effectively taught Clare about the tenets and intricacies of *ars dictaminis*, literally ‘the art of letter writing’, and how to develop that art efficaciously to her own specific ends may still be *sub judice*, but her works were to provide a model for even the Doctor Seraphicus himself long after her death⁸. That is to say, she helped forge an authentically Franciscan literature, stylistically and rhetorically better, perhaps, than Francis’s own⁹, and her contemporaries simply had to come to terms with it, no matter how reluctantly. Despite the difficulty that certain scholarship still has in accepting this fact today, it is nevertheless becoming increasingly more evident that at least in her letter-writing was Clare obviously no one’s handmaid.

⁵ Pozzi & Rima, p. 56: «Tetragona e bruciante» (my trans.).

⁶ Cfr. *ibid.*, (my trans.), & M. Bartoli, *Chiara, Una donna tra silenzio e memoria*, Milano 2001, p. 149.

⁷ Pozzi & Rima, p. 248.

⁸ For the editorial anecdotes characterising the plight of this short letter-collection, cfr. Pozzi & Rima, pp. 15-18 and M.P. Alberzoni, *Rassegne. Chiara d'Assisi e Agnese di Boemia. Edizioni e studi recenti*, «Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia», 57 (2003), pp. 439-460, partic. p. 440. For Clare’s fourth letter to Agnes as a possible model for saint Bonaventure, cfr. Bonaventure, *Writings Concerning the Order*, cur. D. Monti, New York 1994, p. 68 cit. in Johnson *Clare, Leo* cit., p. 100.

⁹ Cfr. A. Marini, *Ancilla Christi, plantula sancti Francisci. Gli scritti di Santa Chiara e la Regola*, in *Chiara di Assisi*, Atti del XX Convegno internazionale, cur. E. Menestò, Spoleto 1993, p. 131 cit. in Johnson, *Clare, Leo* cit., p. 97. See also Pozzi & Rima, pp. 39ff, 198-248; T. Lombardi, *Santa Chiara di Assisi: fonti e spiritualità*, Ferrara 1982, p. 50; R. Zavalloni, *La personalità di Chiara d'Assisi. Studio psicologico*, Santa Maria degli Angeli, Assisi 1993, p. 67. Marti (M. Marti, *Sugli scritti di Chiara d'Assisi*, in Id., *Ultimi contributi dal certo al vero*, Galatina 1995, pp. 5-18, cit. in Menestò, *Lo stato attuale* cit., p. 9), hypothesizes that Clare received help from a secretary, brother Leo, for both her letters and her *Testamentum*.

Her epistolary art was not only a question of form, but also one of function. That function was, according to Chiara Frugoni, 'regular' inasmuch as, through her letters to Agnes, Clare strove to order her thoughts regarding the type of rule (in Latin *regula*) she ought to adopt for all those women wanting to follow her way of following Francis¹⁰. That function was also political inasmuch as the Fourth Lateran Council had been all too clear on this matter – after 1215 no new orders at all were to be founded¹¹. It had been difficult enough for Francis to write out his own Rule and have it approved after Lateran IV, thus producing his first attempt, the *Regula non bullata*, in 1221, and the revised, not to mention greatly modified, version, the *Regula bullata*, two years later. And if Francis, considered a saint while still in the flesh, had found it so hard to have his Rule finally accepted, what was Clare to do so many years afterwards?

Neither a theologian nor a mystic in the modern definition of such terms¹², but not the 'unworthy, useless soul' either as she most humbly defined herself as being perhaps yet again only

¹⁰ Clare did not draw from Francis's *Regula bullata*, which was the fruit of gross compromise, but to the earlier, unabridged *Regula sine bulla*. She also drew from his *Testamentum*, which had, however, been rendered unbinding by the *Quo elongati*, on which point cfr. H. Grundmann, *Die Bulle «Quo elongati» Papst Gregors IX*, «Archivum Franciscanum Historicum», 54 (1961), pp. 1-23, partic. p. 19. The two main sources for her own *Forma vitae* were texts, therefore, which most of the Order was no longer bound to heed. On this point, cfr. C.A. Acquadro, C.C. Mondonico, *La Regola di Chiara di Assisi: Il Vangelo come forma di vita*, in *Clara Claris* cit. pp. 147-232, partic. pp. 191-192, 203.

¹¹ *Conc. Lat. IV*, can. 13: «De novis religionibus prohibitis: Ne nimia religionum diversitas gravem in Ecclesia Dei confusionem inducat firmiter prohibemus ne quis de cætero novam religionem inveniat sed quicumque voluerit ad religionem converti unam de approbatis assumat. Similiter qui voluerit religiosam domum fundare de novo regulam et institutionem accipiat de religionibus approbatis. Illud etiam prohibemus ne quis in diversis monasteriis locum monachi habere præsumat nec unus abbas pluribus monasteriis praesidere».

¹² Cfr. T.J. Johnson, *Clare of Assisi: A Woman of Spirit*, *Clare of Assisi's Theology of Prayer and Contemporary Male Spirituality*, in *Clare of Assisi: A Medieval and Modern Woman*, cur. I. Peterson, New York 1996, pp. 169-188, partic. p. 171.

echoing Francis himself¹³, Clare was obviously well versed in the art of communicating in economy¹⁴. In other words, Agnes of Prague, that «irreducible hand-maiden of Christ»¹⁵, became Clare's mirror or specular image¹⁶, the perfect means through which she might speak her mind despite those thick cloister walls surrounding her and the even thicker veil of misogyny in both papal and imperial circles beyond them.

The first occasion to do so arose as early as 1219, the year in which Francis journeyed as a pilgrim to the Holy Land right into the enemy camp of the Sultan of Egypt himself, al-Malik al-Kāmil¹⁷. Back in Italy, Saint Damian's, together with the other Clarian settlements in Spello, Foligno, Perugia, Arezzo, Siena, Florence and Lucca, received orders from Rome that they should abandon the Franciscan model, which had never been approved in writing by the Church anyway, and conform, instead, to a Benedictine-Cistercian Rule fashioned especially for them called the 'Hugolinian Constitutions'. Foreshadowing the *Forma vivendi* written later in 1228, these constitutions were so-called because they had been compiled by Hugo (Ugolino) of the Counts of Segni, the future Gregory IX¹⁸. Saint Damian's and Santa Maria di Monticelli outside Florence were eventually exempted and could thus continue following Francis's *forma vivendi*, but the others were not. Any new establishment, including Agnes's in Prague, were at most allowed to call themselves 'Damianite', thereby

¹³ For the *hapax legomenon* «homo inutilis et indigna creatura» used by Francis in his *Letter to the Entire Order*, 47, see J. Hoerberichts, *Francis' Letter to All the Brothers (Letter to the Entire Order) Title, Theme, Structure and Language*, «Collectanea Franciscana», 78 (2008), pp. 5-86, partic. p. 72.

¹⁴ For Clare the theologian, cfr. R. Lokaj, *L'inventività liturgica di Chiara d'Assisi*, «Frate Francesco», 2 (2010), pp. 47-63, & Johnson, *Clare of Assisi: A Woman of Spirit* cit.

¹⁵ Frugoni, *Una solitudine abitata* cit., pp. 40, 48, 198. Cfr. also Rotzetter, *Chiara d'Assisi* cit., p. 317 *et passim*.

¹⁶ For specularity as less Franciscan than Clarian, cfr. Johnson, *Clare of Assisi: A Woman of Spirit* cit., p. 174.

¹⁷ For a thought-provoking reconstruction/deconstruction of this visit, cfr. E. Ferrero, *Francesco e il Sultano*, Torino 2019.

¹⁸ For the role of the Hugolinian Constitutions and Gregory VII's continued 'suggestions' to Agnes concerning how she should live within the walls of her monastery in Prague without following Clare's suggestions at all, see Frugoni, *Una solitudine abitata* cit., pp. 40-44.

alluding to the Franciscan model enacted by Clare at Saint Damian's, but, in reality, severing all formal contact with the Franciscan-Clarian model¹⁹. The women now coming to monasticism, attracted by Francis's and Clare's life choice, were being forced to adopt something qualitatively very different. Not only. The Hugolinian Constitutions decreed that once a woman entered the cloister, she was never to leave it again under any circumstances, not even in death.

The hallmarks of this type of monasticism were constant penance, regimented fasting, and absolute silence. Compared to the more austere, but yet substantially more open, model propounded by Clare, such a regime was a sharp turn away indeed from the original spirit of the Franciscan movement. She, consequently, had to intervene where and how she could. She decided to do so by drawing on the age-old tradition, which early Franciscanism had made its own, of creating stark dichotomies, black and white situations, that would be relatively easy to understand. She would continue to oppose the misguided papal measures to distance her and all other Franciscan women from the Franciscan fold, but would do so by creating a Franciscan heroine, a beaming light shining the way into the Lord's garden. To offset that light, however, to show just how bright that light actually was, she needed someone or something to represent the black. That script, in other words, required a villain who could obviously not be the pope. She did, however, already have someone in mind. In other words, that villain already existed, a boy she had often seen in Assisi, a wily lad who had in the meantime

¹⁹ Cfr. Rotzetter, *Chiara d'Assisi* cit., p. 271. The Damianite model spread rapidly throughout Europe with the foundation of sixty or seventy monasteries already by 1238. In order to dissipate the confusion in the technical nomenclature between 'Clarian-damianean' (communities directly under Clare at Saint Damian's), 'Damianite' (communities of women within the orbit of the Hugolinian Constitutions), '*sorores Minores*' (religious women gravitating towards the ideals of Franciscanism but not bound to the cloister) and, in the end, 'Poor Clares' or, in Italian '*clarisse*' (communities of women characterised by the Rule emanated by pope Urban IV in 1263, that is, *after* Clare's death), cfr. M.P. Alberzoni, *Chiara di Assisi e il francescanesimo femminile*, in AA.VV., *Francesco d'Assisi e il primo secolo di storia francescana*, Torino 1997, pp. 203-236, partic. pp. 213-218; Casagrande, *La Regola di Innocenzo IV* cit., p. 73.

become a resourceful man whom the Church itself had rebaptised as the representative of the Antichrist on earth. If Agnes of Prague was Clare's bright specular image, then Frederick II, the prodigious child born to reunite and lead the Holy Roman Empire, perfectly represented the shadowy forces threatening to shroud that light in darkness and snuff it out completely²⁰.

Frederick II: the emperor who wooed a nun

Exactly the same age as Clare and destined to die only three years before her, Frederick von Hohenstaufen had been born on 26 December 1194 near Assisi in a town called Iesi, now in the region next to Umbria called Le Marche²¹. His god-mother was the duchess of Spoleto, originally from Nocera Umbra, who had held him at the baptismal font in the cathedral of Assisi. Not only is this cathedral, San Rufino, where Francis and Clare both received their own baptism²², but it also stands right next door to Clare's own family home. Because of their prestigious position within both the Assisan urban landscape and the local social fabric, Clare's family members were sure to have been included in the festivities and the welcoming entourage when the imperial family deigned from time to time to visit the small Umbrian city²³. Less the «old friend»²⁴, as the emperor is purported to have been, than an imperial 'acquaintance', Clare had seen him on many occasions indeed before her flight to the Portiuncula the

²⁰ On Frederick II, ever since birth, representing the forces of evil in his own time, the Antichrist and the Devil, see F. Delle Donne, *Federico II: la condanna della memoria. Metamorfosi di un mito*, Roma 2012, *passim*.

²¹ For a succinct discussion of the portentous and prodigious nature of Frederick's birth in light of the various sources, cfr. Delle Donne, *Federico II* cit., pp. 15 ff., 40. For how it was the Franciscan chronicler, Salimbene de Adam, who first insinuated the doubt that it had not actually been the ageing Constance to bear the future emperor, see *ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

²² R. Manselli, *Assisi tra Impero e Papato*, in *Assisi al Tempo di San Francesco*, Atti del V Convegno Internazionale della Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani (Assisi, 13-16 ottobre 1977), Assisi 1978, pp. 337-58, partic. p. 349.

²³ Rotzetter, *Chiara d'Assisi* cit., pp. 157, 296. For Frederick II at Assisi, cfr. also Bartoli, *Chiara* cit., p. 123.

²⁴ Cfr. W. Murray, *A Mended and Broken Heart. The Life and Love of Francis of Assisi*, New York 2008, p. 175.

night of Palm Sunday, 1212. Though later confined to St Damian's, she was, furthermore, also destined to remain in contact with the emperor thanks to brother Helias who had for many years effectively led the Franciscan Order. Nor did Helias's demonisation and expulsion from the Order in 1239 stop him from regularly calling on Clare, as he had always done, even after he had joined Frederick's camp²⁵. In short, either directly or indi-

²⁵ It is unlikely that brother Helias suffered a complete *damnatio memoriae*, as has been suggested. On this point, cfr. P. Calzolari, *Massoneria Francescanesimo Alchimia*, Scandiano 1988, pp. 15, 25 *et passim*; Id., *Presenza occulta e manifesta dell'Imperatore Federico II nella Basilica di San Francesco ad Assisi. Frate Elia e la congiura del silenzio*, «Viator», 5 (2001), pp. 135-154. It is true, however, that his name is strangely absent in Thomas of Celano's *Vita secunda* and *Tractatus*. On this point, see E. Prinzivalli, *Un santo da leggere: Francesco d'Assisi nel percorso delle fonti agiografiche*, in *Francesco d'Assisi e il primo secolo cit.*, pp. 71-116, partic. pp. 78-79. Counter-arguments for his demonisation throughout the centuries are made in G. Barone, *Frate Elia: suggestioni da una rilettura*, in *I compagni di Francesco e la prima generazione minoritica*, Atti del Convegno della Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani (Assisi, 17-19 ottobre 1991), Spoleto 1992, pp. 59-80; and A. Cocci, *Chiara e l'Ordine francescano*, in *Chiara di Assisi*, Atti del XX Convegno internazionale della Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani e del Centro Interuniversitario di Studi Francescani (Assisi, 15-17 ottobre 1992), Spoleto 1993 (from now on *Chiara di Assisi. Atti*), pp. 67-86, partic. pp. 84-85, n. 86. For Helias defeated by the so-called 'priestly party' within the Order, cfr. P. Messa, *Frate Elia: da Assisi a Cortona: Storia di un passaggio*, Cortona 2005. For Helias friendly with Clare and Frederick II, see R. Brooke, *Early Franciscan Government. Elias to Bonaventure*, Cambridge 1959, pp. 105, 169, 174. On the relationship between Helias and Frederick II, cfr. Rotzetter, *Chiara d'Assisi cit.*, pp. 268-270, 305; C. Rossetti, *Frate Elia di Assisi: sintesi biografica e bibliografica*, «Labrys», 3 (1982), pp. 35-48; F. Accrocca, *Quattro recenti pubblicazioni clariane*, «Collectanea Franciscana», 73/1 (2003), pp. 289-310, partic. pp. 304-306, cit. also in M.P. Alberzoni, *Chiara e San Damiano tra Ordine minoritico e Curia papale*, in *Clara Claris cit.*, pp. 27-70, partic. p. 65. Cfr. also A. Cocci, *Chiara e l'Ordine francescano cit.*, p. 76, but mainly Frugoni, *Una solitudine abitata cit.*, p. 166. For Helias as the possible courier of Clare's letters to Agnes of Prague for all but the fourth and last letter, which was delivered instead by friars Amatus and Bonagura (see *4Ecl*, 40, p. 2284), cfr. M.P. Alberzoni, *Da pauperes domine a sorores pauperes: La negazione di un modello di santità itinerante femminile in Pellegrinaggi e culto dei Santi: Santità minoritica del primo e secondo ordine*, cur. B. Vetere, Nardò 2001, pp. 50-54, cit. in Johnson, *Clare*, *Leo cit.*, p. 93.

rectly, once Clare had stepped into the Portiuncula and into History, the Hohenstaufen emperor never stopped being a constant presence in her life, militarily, symbolically and otherwise.

Militarily the Hohenstaufen affected Clare and her world in what came to be known as the *Guerra de Assisi*. Hardly a war in either the modern or the medieval sense, this supposed “War of Assisi” is to be understood, rather, under the greater threat of the Mongol invasion from without and in the more general picture of Italy in utter havoc under the Hohenstaufens from within. This ‘war’ was actually little more than a siege carried out in 1240 by the imperial commander in chief, Vitale d’Aversa, who had not been able to replenish his supplies in Perugia and had naturally moved on to the closest city nearby. He could easily have taken the walled city of Assisi completely, but only allowed his troops to exact ‘imperial homage’ from the outer-lying houses and churches, many of which, unfortunately, were duly pillaged and destroyed²⁶. It was called, after all, an «agreste bellum», ‘a country war’, or a ‘war that took place in the fields’. It was actually never *meant* to take place within the city walls at all²⁷. Once they had had their fill, these troops had simply moved on, only to do much the same the following year (1241) on their way back down the peninsula. Less than a war, therefore, it should indeed be seen as a forced taking of tributes. For the local Umbrians, however, generally more liege to the pope than to the emperor, it was nothing short of theft. Used, in fact, as anti-imperialist propaganda, on both occasions Clare is said to have ‘saved’ the city of Assisi by turning the enemy away through the sole force of the Eucharist²⁸. That is, she is said to have stood on the walls of Saint Damian’s and to have brandished the pyxis containing the body of Christ before the marauding troops. With the soldiers turned away by the sheer force of the divine Substance and

²⁶ Cfr. U. Nicolini, *La struttura urbana di Assisi*, in *Assisi al tempo di San Francesco* cit., pp. 247-270, partic. p. 252; S. Da Campagnola, *La società assisana nelle fonti francescane*, *ibid.*, pp. 359-392, partic. p. 390.

²⁷ Cfr. E. Franceschini, *I due assalti dei saraceni a S. Damiano e ad Assisi*, «Aevum», 27 (1953), pp. 289-306, partic. p. 293; Nicolini, *La struttura urbana* cit., p. 252.

²⁸ For the value of the eucharist in Clare’s world, cfr. Johnson *Clare of Assisi* cit., p. 175. See also n. 32.

sent running for their lives, Clare was hailed as a veritable *salvatrix* not only of St Damian's but also of the very city itself.

Why the ostentation of the Eucharist should have scared away or, as Brooke adds, «surprisingly repulsed»²⁹ Christian soldiers, is quickly explained: they were by and large not Christian. Given that Frederick himself was (again) ex-communicated for various reasons³⁰, the witnesses deposing in the Process of Clare's canonisation do not hesitate to associate Frederick's imperial army as somehow connected with the «infernal Mongols»³¹ effectively knocking on Europe's eastern doors at the time³². The sisters surviving Clare, therefore, describe Frederick's soldiers as «Tartars, Saracens and other enemies of God and the holy Church»³³. It was a clear-cut 'us-them' situation.

Or was it? Sublime oxymoron used to conceal greater truth, the sources do not really explain what these hapless «imperial Tartars and Saracens» actually did. The sources suggest that a certain number of soldiers did somehow break into the private recesses of Saint Damian's – the main entrance was, after all, not exactly that of a fortress. Why, however, did they allegedly climb

²⁹ R. Brooke, *The Image of St Francis. Responses to Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge 2006, p. 22.

³⁰ The effective number of times and reasons why Frederick II was ex-communicated is still unclear. For sure his universalistic ambitions, on the one hand, and his thirst for knowledge, on the other, including his openness to other religions and languages, are at the basis of adverse papal attitude. See Delle Donne, *Federico II* cit., pp. 59-60.

³¹ For the play-on-words *Tartari*, *immo Tartarei*, cfr. Matheus Parisiensis, *Cronica maiora*, ed. F. Liebermann, in MGH, SS, 28, Hannoverae 1888, pp. 107-389, partic. p. 212, cit. in Delle Donne, *Federico II* cit., p. 33.

³² On such an unprecedented invasion from the east that had all of Europe fearing for its very survival, see *ibid.* pp. 33, 53 ff.

³³ For the so-called «War of Assisi», that is, the Saracen assault of the city in 1240-41 under Vitale d'Aversa, for the emperor seen as an ally of the «enemies of Christians», and for Clare as the saviour of Assisi, cfr., above all, *PrCa* 3, 18-19, pp. 2471-2472 (deposition of suor Filippa). For a better critical view, see also Franceschini, *I due assalti* cit.; G. Casagrande, *Le compagne di Chiara*, in *Chiara di Assisi, Atti* cit., pp. 381-425, partic. p. 419; Rotzetter, *Chiara d'Assisi* cit., pp. 298, 301-306; Bartoli, *Chiara, Una donna* cit., pp. 135-137, 176-178; and Frugoni, *Una solitudine abitata* cit., p. 164. The Saracen assault is also mentioned in the *Process of canonisation* at *PrCa* 2, 20; 4, 14; 7, 6; 9, 2; 12, 8; 13, 9; 14, 3. For such faith placed in Eucharist miracles, cfr. A. Maiarelli, P. Messa, *Le fonti liturgiche degli scritti di Chiara d'Assisi*, in *Clara Claris* cit., pp. 97-146, partic. p. 112.

over the walls when they could easily have strolled in through the rickety front door that was already hanging off its hinges and, on least one occasion, had also literally dropped off almost killing Clare³⁴? And what did these would-be raiders actually do there once they had entered? The sources are deafeningly silent. A clue, however, can be found in one fleeting mention: Clare had ordered her sisters to cut their hair (*tondere*) and cover their heads in ash. A sign of penance and conversion at the Portiuncula, extreme tonsure was also a technique that had, after all, been used by women for centuries in times of breakdown in internal resistance to besieging forces with less-than-honourable intentions. With all respect for the power of the Eucharist, if the «imperial Tartars and Saracens» broke in to what was, to the naked eye, an obviously very poor abode indeed, it was not to pillage. Upon finding these poorly-dressed women also to be *tonditae*, no wonder they had also left in a hurry.

The sources, furthermore, do not even mention that Saint Damian's, to this very day, lies well *outside* the city walls of Assisi. Taking Saint Damian's, or not taking it, could hardly have had any bearing on the success of a siege laid at the city proper. In this light, the episode recounted in the Clarian *Legenda* actually supports the version of the facts as 'relatively friendly troops passing through the outer-lying area', the *comitatus*, rather than a full-scale war at the city gates. Indeed, in the 'relative friendliness' of such troops, the hypothesis formulated by Rotzetter and Accrocca gains support³⁵. If Helias had always remained in contact with Clare and would continue to do so until her death, albeit, perhaps, through his companion Angelo, is it not possible that now, as Frederick's new ally and advisor, he might have been able to suggest that Saint Damian's, and Assisi along with it, be spared? Again, without diminishing the power of faith placed in the recently-promoted fashion for the Eucharist³⁶, it is plausible that Clare's role in the so-called 'War of Assisi' was actually more

³⁴ For the miracle, cfr. *PrCa* V 5, 2479; VI 17, 2483; XIV 6, 2499-2500; XV 2, 2501. For this interpretation, cfr. Frugoni, *Una solitudine abitata* cit., p. 119. For the relative openness of Saint Damian's, see also G. Dickson, *Religious Enthusiasm in the Medieval West: Revivals, crusades, saints*, Abingdon 2000, p. 44 n. 37.

³⁵ On the relationship between Helias and Frederick II, see again n. 24.

³⁶ See n. 32.

behind-the-scenes and far-reaching than has traditionally been suggested.

No matter how undetected and unfathomed these personal and political connections played out their respective roles, what the people of Assisi chose to make of this 'war' far outweighed, however, what they had effectively lost in the war effort itself. Indeed, it is precisely here, in fact, that Clare's thaumaturgical and strongly iconic saving of the city truly comes to the fore. According to the sources, she always remains within Saint Damian's and yet is hailed as Assisi's saviour. The imperial troops are led not personally by Frederick II, but by Vitale d'Aversa, and yet they bear all the derogatory hallmarks of the ex-communication wielded against their supreme leader. In perfect black-white dichotomy, like the pulcelle d'Orléans two hundred years later, it was as if Clare had led Assisi's resistance to Frederick himself in open battle and had won almost single-handedly. With Christ obviously on the side of Assisi, Clare had sent the cowering emperor packing.

An alleged political and military adversary for the tiny Assisi and even tinier St Damian's, Frederick II dramatically affected Clare and her world also from a symbolic point of view. Indeed, the black-white dichotomy had already been applied to various episodes in the life of Saint Francis, where the wayward Hohenstaufen emperor, variously constructed and deconstructed according to political and ideological programmes³⁷, had invariably ended up playing the part of the *bête noire* that would ultimately be developed into the Antichrist at the end of the same century in Joachimitic circles³⁸. One particular and surely late legend has it, for example, that in 1222 saint Francis and Frederick II had supposedly met in the castle of Bari³⁹. Here the emperor is purported to have sent a beautiful woman to him only to spy on the

³⁷ On this very point of the flexibility with which various historiographical traditions have willfully used and misused the symbol that Frederick II had become, see G. Francesconi, *Storia, profezia, mito. Federico II e la moltiplicazione delle memorie: a proposito di un libro recente*, «Studi medievali», S. III, 54 (2013), pp. 835-850, partic. p. 850.

³⁸ See *ibid.* p. 841.

³⁹ The source for the legend, an inscription uncovered in the castle of Bari with the date 1635, contains an echo of Matthew Paris's anti-Friderician terminology, whereby the seductress seems to have the 'head of a

whole scene, presumably through some secret crack or hole in the wall. If the temptress was successful in her art, then Frederick would have proof that Francis was no saint. The emperor-voyeur, however, was going to be disappointed yet again.

Legends often alluding, however, to greater truths, as Francesconi has recently pointed out with philological precision⁴⁰, rather than beautiful women tempting saints in castle chambers, it is more plausible that at the roots of this popular tale we should see an association of ideas. Far more surprising than myth, only a year or so before the supposed episode in Bari, a dichotomy *had* actually been established between the emperor and the saint that was more concretely political indeed than popular and voyeuristic. Frederick had been invited to launch a massive attack on Muslim power in the Middle East, which was to result, a few years later, in the Sixth Crusade (1228-29). All crusades typically leave Europe from Puglia, hence the setting for the legend and the choice of protagonist, the *puer Apuliae* himself, Frederick II⁴¹. However, as pointed out above, saint Francis had just completed a mission of his own at the court of the Sultan of Egypt and had, unlike most of his crusading colleagues, been very successful indeed. In his 1219 visit to the Holy Land, Francis may not have converted the Sultan to Christianity, but did manage, nevertheless, to be heard out. After several ordeals, which had greatly impressed the supreme Muslim leader, Francis had been allowed to come home unscathed⁴². Whereas the tacitly-kept aim of most European crusaders fighting in the Middle East was not to convert Muslims to Christianity at all, but to secure lands and wealth for themselves, Francis, with utter indifference for territorial conquest, had demonstrated the true, inherent strength of

hydra'. Cfr. Rotzetter, *Chiara d'Assisi* cit., p. 186. For legend as capable of imposing elements of truth, see A. Boureau, *La papessa Giovanna. Storia di una leggenda medievale*, Torino 1991, cit. in Francesconi, *Storia, profezia, mito* cit., p. 837.

⁴⁰ Francesconi, *Storia, profezia, mito* cit., p. 850.

⁴¹ For a discussion of how this epithet anchored Frederick's fame not only to modern-day Puglia but to the entire Italian Mezzogiorno, cfr. Delle Donne, *Federico II* cit., pp. 151-155; Francesconi, *Storia, profezia, mito* cit., p. 846.

⁴² On the implausible veridicity of such ordeals, especially the trial by fire, see Ferrero, *Francesco* cit., p. 185.

his faith. Far from coming home empty-handed⁴³, Francis's mission to the Middle East had been, symbolically, an overwhelming success⁴⁴.

In this success, Francis had been allured not by a temptress, as the allegorical account suggests, but by worldly fortune and glory. If this is true, then the aspect of the legend depicting Frederick in the guise of voyeur also deserves more serious interpretation. After all, any attempt to hypothesize voyeuristic tendencies in the emperor at this level, no matter how impenitent a Don Juan *avant la lettre* he is thought to have been⁴⁵, would be utterly naïve and preposterously simplistic. To the contrary, it would be much more pertinent and plausible, rather, to hypothesize that, as Francis sailed across the Mediterranean to accomplish his truly awe-inspiring meeting with the Sultan, the whole of Christendom, Frederick included, had been left utterly amazed as simple on-lookers. Less the sexual voyeur, Frederick had remained helplessly dumbstruck to see that Francis had achieved in a few months on his own what entire armies of fine Christian soldiers in their thousands had not even dreamed of accomplishing in years of crusades. Though mindful about overstating the few details we have regarding the mission⁴⁶, we might well say that Francis, not Frederick, was the true *stupor mundi*. That is to say, the *poverello*, not the emperor, was the true wonder of the world.

It is exactly this opposition to Frederick II the symbol, the redefining and requalification, that is, of the term *stupor* and the semantic value of amazement alluded to therein, that Clare addresses in her fourth and last letter to Agnes. Indeed, it becomes the hermeneutical key for its most-deeply bedded meaning. To understand this, however, as padre Pozzi had sagaciously pointed

⁴³ Such a view is expressed, for example, in F. Gabrieli, *San Francesco e l'Oriente islamico*, in *Espansione del francescanesimo tra occidente e oriente nel secolo XIII*, Atti del convegno Internazionale (Assisi, 12-14 ottobre 1978), Assisi 1979, pp. 105-122.

⁴⁴ On Francis's 'peaceful crusade' to the Middle East and his legacy, cfr. *I Francescani e la crociata. Atti dell'XI Convegno storico di Greccio, Greccio, 3-4 maggio 2013*, cur. A. Cacciotti, M. Melli, Milano 2014.

⁴⁵ Cfr., e.g., the plight of the Epicureans, including Frederick II, in Dante, *Inferno*, X 119: «qua dentro è 'l secondo Federico».

⁴⁶ G.G. Merlo, *Frate Francesco e il superamento della crociata*, in *I Francescani e la crociata* cit., pp. 17-30, partic. p. 18.

out, some preliminary considerations must be made on Clare's writing style and the programme it reflected.

Pozzì's treasure trove enriched

First of all, it must be said that her first letter to Agnes of Prague was occasioned by the princess' stupefying decision to embrace Clare's model of penance, absolute poverty and the *sequela Christi (et Francisci)*, and thus enter the Clarian cloister⁴⁷. By Clare's second and third letters, however, we can glean that Agnes's way of life within that cloister was being decided for her from Rome. No longer authorised to follow in the footsteps of her two chivalrous, affably courteous, but absolutely poor, Franciscan models from Assisi, Agnes was now being forced to become a wealthy, but strictly taciturn, Benedictine. This is why, in her second letter to Agnes, Clare quotes from Paul to invite her new sister not to «believe anybody nor to allow anything to force her to abandon her decision (*propositum*) to walk along the pathway of blessedness or to place stumbling-blocks along her way»⁴⁸. Here Clare is implicitly referring to Gregory IX. In turn, in his papal bull, *Angelis gaudium*, dated May 1238, the pope as theologian and legislator explicitly orders Agnes not to take advice from someone who is «more zealous than knowledgeable»⁴⁹. Here Gregory is referring to Clare. Referring in turn to Gregory and his *Angelis gaudium*, though perhaps also implicitly basing her thoughts and language on Francis's *De vera et perfecta laetitia*⁵⁰,

⁴⁷ Cfr. also Johnson *Clare of Assisi: A Woman of Spirit* cit., p. 176.

⁴⁸ 2ECI 13-14: «secura gaudens et alacris per tramitem caute beatitudinis gradiaris nulli credens, nulli consentiens, quod te vellet ab hoc proposito revocare, quod tibi poneret in via scandalum». For St Paul, cfr. *Rom.* 14, 13.

⁴⁹ Cfr. Frugoni, *Una solitudine abitata* cit., p. 42. For a full English translation of the *Angelis gaudium* see Armstrong, *The Lady* cit., pp. 360-362. For further discussion on the tug-of-war between Clare and Gregory IX for sway over Agnes, see A. Marini, *Pauperem Christum, virgo pauper, amplectere. Il punto su Chiara ed Agnese di Boemia*, in *Chiara e la diffusione delle Clarisse nel secolo XIII*, Atti del Convegno di Studi in occasione dell'VIII Centenario della nascita di Santa Chiara (Manduria, 14-15 dicembre 1994), cur. G. Andenna, B. Vetere, Lecce 1998, pp. 121-132.

⁵⁰ Cfr. *Opuscula dictata* VIII, in *Fontes* cit., pp. 214-242, cit. in Johnson, *Clare, Leo* cit., p. 96.

Clare again quotes Paul⁵¹ and thus invites Agnes to partake in the «joys of salvation in the Creator of salvation»⁵². That is, Clare appeals to a greater authority, indeed *the* greater authority. And if Clare *is* quoting Gregory's *gaudium* here, then she in turn, who alone can «truly rejoice»⁵³, uses the term eight times against him in its various declensions throughout her short letter. In the following two lines alone it is used four times, together with a direct reprise of the opening words of Gregory's bull:

Who then could tell me not to **rejoice** over such amazingly great **joys**? **Rejoice** in the Lord as well, my dearest one, oh most beloved Lady in Christ, **joy** of the angels and crown of our sisters, lest bitterness and darkness envelop you⁵⁴.

In Clare's view, Gregory's 'joy for the Angels' (*Angelis gaudium*), therefore, was really 'bitterness and darkness' for Agnes, for she was meant to capitulate, abandon Clare and her mission, and adopt his Benedictine-style constitutions in full. Quite to the contrary, for Clare the 'joy of the angels' should have been that Agnes could:

turn [her] mind toward to the mirror of eternity, place [her] soul in the splendour of glory, [her] heart in the figure of divine substance and transform [herself] entirely in contemplation into the image of divinity itself so as to enjoy what His friends enjoy as they taste the hidden sweetness which God reserved ever since the beginning for those who might love Him⁵⁵.

Hardly the delicate, passive little sapling historiography has made her out to be, Clare, in her letters, courageously, intelligently and implicitly was taking on the papacy itself.

Though perhaps no theologian in the modern sense of the term, as stated above, the weapon she wielded was the very source of papal authority, the Father and His Apostle. Intuiting this, Pozzi did not simply limit his fifty-page analysis to instances of *cursus*, alliteration, paronomasia and the likes⁵⁶. He also paused on Clare's dialogue with Scriptural authority and the ability with

⁵¹ *Heb.*, 2, 10.

⁵² *3ECI* 2, p. 2275: «salutis gaudia in auctore salutis».

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5, p. 2275: «Vere gaudere possum, nec me aliquis posset a tanto gaudio facere alienam».

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-11, p. 2276 (my trans.).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 12-14, p. 2276 (my trans.).

⁵⁶ See again nn. 3, 4, 6 & 7.

which she strove to integrate it in her humbled, Franciscan writing-style. Humble in form, perhaps, but absolutely biting in content, as the case briefly discussed above regarding 'joy' demonstrates, the technique Clare used most frequently is implicit quotation or intertextuality. Pozzi writes that this «consists in inserting an easily-recognisable fragment into a context analogous to the original one, without any further notice. In so doing Clare expresses her own thoughts through the words of others so as to confer unto them greater prestige»⁵⁷. A major advancement in Clarian studies, where Pozzi's ground-breaking analysis might benefit from further reflection, however, is precisely here: Clare was not interested in prestige. She was interested, rather, in effective communication, that is, in advising Agnes on the right course of action without either of them getting into trouble.

In applying his hypothesis of prestige to Clare's letters, however, Pozzi discovered that she most loved quoting the *Song of Songs* and saint Paul's letters⁵⁸. It is not really surprising, therefore, that in the third letter to Agnes, amid the references to Gregory IX's angelical 'joy', the most obvious case of 'prestigious quotation', as Pozzi called it, there should be another term 'borrowed' from saint Paul, yet another *richiamo occulto*⁵⁹, «clear to all those directly involved»⁶⁰. This is the term «bravium», meaning 'reward' or 'prize'⁶¹. And it is precisely here that Pozzi's revealing hypothesis deserves to be taken to its logical conclusion. If, in her third letter to Agnes, Clare was referring to Gregory's *Angelis gaudium* while throwing the key term 'joy' back in his face, the authority backing her up was none other than saint Paul. For sure Clare was taking a gamble but if «bravium» was meant to be recognised by Agnes as Pauline, it was also meant, conversely, to be simply dismissed as vain Scriptural embellishment by all the filtering agencies also happening to recognise it as such. No matter how

⁵⁷ Pozzi & Rima, p. 241 (my trans.).

⁵⁸ For the *Song of Songs* as an important co-text behind Clare's fourth letter to Agnes, see also F. Raurell, *Verso il femminile delle fonti francescane* (Introd.), in *Chiara. Francescanesimo al femminile*, cur. D. Covi, D. Dozzi, Bologna 2004, pp. 11-24, partic. pp. 19-21; Id., *La lettura del "Cantico dei Cantici" al tempo di Chiara e la IV lettera ad Agnese di Praga*, *ibid.*, pp. 188- 289.

⁵⁹ Pozzi & Rima, p. 248.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁶¹ Cfr. 3EC/3 quotes *Phil.* 3,14: «persequor ad bravium supernae vocationis Dei in Christo Iesu». For full quote, cfr. n. 58.

misleadingly simple its use might have appeared, Agnes, however, was meant to realise just how charged in meaning that Pauline term was.

In order to understand what Clare was trying to do with Paul's term *bravium* and, more importantly, how Agnes was meant to interpret it, the medieval art of quotation is to be construed today as it was then, that is, as the product of a long tradition in the Latin-speaking Christian West. This tradition stemmed from saint Augustine and culminated in that master of implicit and explicit quotations, Francis Petrarch. Clare, therefore, was born into an age and a tradition in which quotation is no simple matter. Akin to modern foot-notes, which faithfully refer the quote to a particular author, work, edition, and page number, medieval quotation was also meant to re-evoke a specific author, work and message. In order to retrieve that message, if one's memory was not sufficiently lucid, as saint Augustine had taught, one had to read, or re-read, the entire original context, 'above and below', from which the quote had been taken⁶². The original Pauline context, read above and below Clare's quote from it, is re-presented here. The medieval art of quotation now invites us to read the following passage applied to Agnes's case as if Clare had written it. In so doing, we should: a) imagine the Pauline masculine declined in the Clarian feminine; b) see Paul's wealthy Jewish past before Damascus on a par with Clare's life of luxury in Assisi before the night at the Portiuncula, or Agnes's life before her conversion; and, c) interpret the dichotomy 'Jewish law : Christian law' as alluding to another, only too real, dichotomy in Clare's life, that is, 'papal diktat: Franciscan *sequela Christi*?. With

⁶² Cfr., e.g., St Augustine, *doctr. christ.*, 2, 8, 12: «Erit igitur divinarum Scripturarum solertissimus indagator, qui primo totas legerit notasque habuerit, et si non dum intellectu, iam tamen lectione» (A fine investigator indeed of Holy Scripture will be, therefore, he who has read it all first and taken it all in. And if he has not understood that much, at least he *has* read it) & *ibid.*, 3, 2, 2: «textus ipse sermonis a praecedentibus et consequentibus partibus, quae ambiguitatem illam in medio posuerunt, restat consulendus, ut videamus cuinam sententiae, de pluribus quae se ostendunt, ferat suffragium eamque sibi contexi patiatur» (it remains necessary to consult the entire passage of the written work from the parts above and the parts below which have surrounded that ambiguous term so that we may see what meaning, from the many possible meanings available, supports [our interpretation] and allows it to sit compatibly in the context).

all these modifications, let us imagine the following to be Clare's own encrypted words to Agnes and her newly-founded Clarian community in Prague.

Finally, my brothers [ie. sisters, etc], rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you for me is not at all grievous, but for you it is safe. Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the act of cutting! For we are the circumcision who worship God in the spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus and have no faith in the flesh. Though I might also have a certain trust in the flesh, if any other man thinks he can place trust in the flesh, I more: circumcised eight days after I was born, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrew parents; as far as the law is concerned, a Pharisee; striving to do my best for religion I became a persecutor of God's church; as for justice, which is in the law, I was blameless. But the very same things I thought constituted my profit, because of Christ, I have come to consider my loss. Indeed, I consider all things a loss because of the overriding knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for Whom I have suffered the loss of all things. I now consider these things as dung so that I may earn Christ as my winnings and be found in Him. I do this because I do not possess righteousness, which is of the law. I seek the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ and is from God and based on faith. I seek to know Him, the power of His resurrection, and to share His sufferings by preparing to die as He did. Should I somehow deserve to be resurrected from the dead – not that I already have [deserved so] or have even come to the end of my journey – nevertheless I follow after [Him] in the hope that I may partake of Jesus Christ and become part of Him. Brothers, I do not think that I have partaken at all except on one count, that I, forgetting those things that are behind and reaching forth unto those that are in front, I press on toward the **prize** (*bravium*) of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Whoever we are who have come this far, let us therefore all think in this way. If you think at all differently, God will shed light on this for you too. Meanwhile, let us all adhere to the same **rule**, which has got us to where we are now. My brothers, be united in following **my rule of life** and observe those who walk [before you] just as you have us as your example. For many walk, about whom I have often spoken to you and now tell you weeping, who are the enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, whose glory is in their shame. These people mind earthly things. Our conduct in life will lead us, instead, to Heaven from whence we wait for our Saviour to come, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who will take our bodies and transform

them from the vile humility now characterising them to the splendour characterising His according to an operation whereby He is also able to subdue all things unto Himself. So then, my brothers and dear friends, you, whom I miss so much, who are my reason to rejoice and my crown, remain steadfast and faithful in the Lord⁶³.

Almost 'throw-away', and entirely unquestionable, New Testament quotation now used by Clare as an encrypted code of action, Agnes was sure to have got the message. She was to remain steadfast in her vow to follow Clare's feminine adaptation of Francis's Rule, no matter how much certain workers of evil

⁶³ *Phil.*, 3: «De cetero, fratres mei, gaudete in Domino. Eadem vobis scribere mihi quidem non pigrum vobis autem necessarium. Videte canes, videte malos operarios, videte concisionem. Nos enim sumus circumcisio qui spiritu Deo servimus et gloriamur in Christo Iesu et non in carne fiduciam habentes quamquam ego habeam confidentiam et in carne si quis alius videtur confidere in carne ego magis. Circumcisis octava die, ex genere Israhel, de tribu Beniamin, Hebraeus ex Hebraeis, secundum legem Pharisaeus, secundum aemulationem persequens ecclesiam Dei, secundum iustitiam quae in lege est conversatus sine querella. Sed quae mihi fuerunt lucra haec arbitratus sum propter Christum detrimenta verumtamen existimo omnia detrimentum esse propter eminentem scientiam Iesu Christi Domini mei propter quem omnia detrimentum feci et arbitror ut stercora ut Christum lucrifaciam et inveniar in illo non habens meam iustitiam, quae ex lege est, sed illam quae ex fide est Christi quae ex Deo est iustitia in fide ad agnoscendum illum et virtutem resurrectionis eius et societatem passionum illius configuratus morti eius. Si quo modo occurram ad resurrectionem quae est ex mortuis, non quod iam acceperim aut iam perfectus sim, sequor autem si comprehendam in quo et comprehensus sum a Christo Iesu. Fratres ego me non arbitror comprehendisse unum autem quae, quidem retro sunt obliviscens ad ea vero quae sunt in priora extendens me ad destinatum, persequor ad **bravium** supernae vocationis Dei in Christo Iesu. Quicumque ergo perfecti hoc sentiamus et si quid aliter sapitis et hoc vobis Deus revelabit verumtamen ad quod pervenimus ut idem sapiamus et **in eadem permaneamus regula**. Imitatores mei estote fratres et observate eos qui ita ambulant sicut habetis formam nos. Multi enim ambulant quos saepe dicebam vobis nunc autem et flens dico inimicos crucis Christi quorum finis interitus quorum deus venter et gloria in confusione ipsorum qui terrena sapiunt. Nostra autem conversatio in caelis est unde etiam salvatorem expectamus Dominum Iesum Christum qui reformabit corpus humilitatis nostrae configuratum corpori claritatis suae secundum operationem qua possit etiam subicere sibi omnia. Itaque fratres mei carissimi et desiderantissimi gaudium meum et corona mea sic state in Domino carissimi».

might bark while presuming to be the legitimate keepers of religious authority. Furthermore, the fact that Clare had not as yet even written her feminine adaptation of Francis's Rule, that is, her own Rule at the height of this third letter (1238?) affords, therefore, at the very least, a certain insight into her plan to do so at some future date. The analysis of the Pauline term «bra-vium» being only one element in the treasure trove of elements now coming to the fore in Clarian studies, it becomes undeniably clear that there is very little about Clare's letters that we might define as simple, entirely personal and readily comprehensible. They would seem to be part, rather, of an epistolary genre characterised by refined polemic, concealed politics and exquisite yet well-camouflaged literariness. The tender sapling had long since grown into a mighty tree indeed.

Nor is the setting here confined to that microcosm which was Assisi or the Spoleto Valley, or even central Italy. The setting for these letters is the broader scene of imperial politics, where the contingent and the abstract coincide. The transalpine setting had traditionally been little more than the scenario of debate and battle for imperial contenders and aspirants to investitures. Now, however, in the first half of the Thirteenth century, it was already the frontier for the spread of new forms of religiosity, including the already-much-celebrated Franciscan penitential movement. It was in this newly-defined scenario that Clare's letter-collection circulated. Translated from Latin into Bohemian and German, it provided concrete instances of Franciscan piety. Its success, however, was due to the figure it celebrated. For the battle Clare was waging in Assisi against Rome and the priestly caste within her own Order, this figure had taken on great importance politically, mystically and symbolically. But why? If Clare encrypted the Pauline invitation in her third letter for Agnes to remain steadfast and faithful in her vow to follow her feminine adaptation of Francis's model of *sequela Christi*, it is necessary to ask who Agnes of Prague actually was for Clare, and what exactly she represented. As stated above, the function carried out by Agnes in Clare's letters was not as a saint in the next world⁶⁴. She

⁶⁴ Pope John Paul II was to proclaim Agnes of Prague saint on 12 November 1989.

came into her own as Clare's specular image and mouthpiece because of what she was, or had been, in *this* world, the concrete *hic et nunc* dancing with its eschatological partner, and leading.

Agnes of Prague, an emblem of Clarian charisma

In his timeless discussion of the term *humilis*, Auerbach pointed out that the Christian Middle Ages interpreted Christ's incarnation as *humiliatio*, a self-humbling⁶⁵. The greatest act of self-humbling of all time, the Incarnation, therefore, is the absolute, inimitable model through which the God of hosts, creator of the universe, the Almighty, becomes a Man of mere dust born in a lowly manger meant for common beasts of burden. According to the medieval mindset, which also characterised the tenets and goals of the first generation of Franciscan penitents, the act of humbling oneself, codified in the Franciscan vow of *minoritas*, that is, of serving the lowest among the low, was all the more recognisable the more one had been numbered among the great. In other words, the higher up the echelons of society one had been, the greater the descent towards the humus and the more dramatic and the more saintly the act of *humiliatio*⁶⁶.

Easily enough done, perhaps, for wealthy men, as the many stories of instantaneous conversion and ascetic existences lived out in the freezing caves of Late Antiquity and the low Middle Ages recount. Examples of such self-humbling in feminine culture become more common, however, only as late as the Twelfth century. The *Umiliate* or 'Humbled Women' of Lombardy, for example, much like the Beguines of the Flanders, were women of high birth who abandoned their luxurious homes and privileges to embrace a life of penance. They did not, however, with-

⁶⁵ E. Auerbach, *Literary Language & Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, Princeton 1993 (ed. or. *Literatursprache und Publikum in der lateinischen Spätantike und im Mittelalter*, Bern 1958), pp. 40, 51.

⁶⁶ For the seemingly oxymorous formula "only the wealthy can become poor" ["può diventare povero solo chi è ricco"], as a paraphrase of H. Grundmann, *Movimenti religiosi nel Medioevo. Ricerche sui nessi storici tra l'eresia, gli Ordini mendicanti e il movimento religioso femminile nel XII e XIII secolo e sulle origini storiche della mistica tedesca*, Bologna 1974 (ed. or. *Eberings Historische Studien*, Berlin 1935 (2nd edit. Darmstadt 1961), p. 163, cfr. Casagrande, *Le compagne* cit., p. 399.

draw behind the mighty, and now rather cosy, walls of monasticism, which had often sprung up from those once-freezing hermit caves, but rather lived together in small, unassuming communities, often in the private house of one of the members, and simply got on with the job of communing with God. Similarly Clare. The utmost model behind Clare's *sancta humilitas*, as it is developed in her letter-collection⁶⁷ under the aegis of Francis's *Epistula ad fideles*⁶⁸, is, as affirmed above, the Lord's Incarnation. When Francis set her up in the semi-abandoned Church of Saint Damian's she could finally enter into the very essence of the founding principles of Franciscanism, which consisted of two sole elements – evangelical inspiration and absolute poverty. Here she could mirror that great act of love that the Father had carried out for the human race. By humbling herself and becoming naked, even in the way in which she wrote, Clare strove to reflect the living God who had humbled Himself to become naked Man.

The only problem was she, a woman, was not allowed to follow Christ quite so closely. If Frugoni's interpretation of Clare's letter-collection is correct, then against the opposition of popes, cardinals and the priestly caste within the Franciscan Order, especially since that devastating 4 October 1226 when Francis had departed from the physical world, laid out naked on the naked mother earth, Clare did not have that many weapons to wield. What she did have, though, was her wit and her pen. And an *epistola*, or better, an entire correspondence through *epistolae*, with

⁶⁷ 4ECI, 18, 2282. Cfr. also A. Marini «*Ancilla Christi, plantula sancti Francisci*». *Gli scritti di Santa Chiara e la Regola*, in *Chiara di Assisi. Atti cit.*, pp. 107-156, cit. in Paoli, *Introduzione cit.*, pp. 2228-30. For the debate on whether it is pertinent to designate Clare as a 'mystic', cfr. Pozzi & Rima cit., pp. 20-21, 26. Buscami, for example, (cfr. A.M. Buscami, *Le lettere di Chiara*, «Frate Francesco», n.s. 68 (2002), pp. 323-337, cit. in Menestò, *Lo stato attuale cit.*, p. 10) defends Clare as a faithful interpreter of the contemporary mystical tradition, whereas Menestò (Menestò, *ibid.*, p. 23) suggests the designation of "pre-mystic".

⁶⁸ 2EFi 2, 3-5, esp. §5: *Qui [scil. Christus], cum dives esset super omnia, voluit ipse in mundo cum beatissima Virgine, matre sua, eligere paupertatem* cit. in Pozzi & Rima cit., p. 31, 49. For the comparison with other female penitential movements, cfr. also Rotzetter, *Chiara d'Assisi cit.*, p. 145. For a discussion of the meaning of *pauperes Dominae* ['povere dame' or 'poor Ladies'], see *ivi* p. 177 & again n.17.

the very woman who could have become the very empress of Christendom, as we shall see better below, might just prove to be a good way of voicing the outcry which the cloistral silence sought so deftly to suffocate. As a reflecting mirror and emblem of Clare's mysticism, Agnes was perfect.

For sure there had precedents of *sancta humiliatio* elsewhere, but they were in the masculine and simply not pertinent to the feminine cause. Indeed, one such precedent had been described by none other than friar Peter, the provincial minister of England. With the authority of his office, he enthusiastically describes the entrance into the Franciscan Order of a certain Eustache from Normanville whose example, Peter writes, was destined to the greater edification of all, compared to the one set by new friars of more modest backgrounds, precisely because he had been «noble and wealthy in the world»⁶⁹. The fact that Eustache had taught arts and law at Oxford, where he had also become house master and chancellor, only strengthened the edifying nature of his example, not to mention the rapidly-growing prestige of the Franciscan Order in England. The poor, it would seem, even if they were men, did not have quite the same chances of demonstrating the arcane workings of the Holy Spirit.

Agnes of Prague, however, was different. As a model for the type of Franciscanism in the feminine espoused by Clare, she was perfect indeed. In the later Middle Ages nobility of bloodline was considered to be a *conditio sine qua non* for canonisation, especially in the case of women⁷⁰. It is no mere coincidence, in fact, that Clare and all her first companions in penance were undoubtedly thought to have come from noble families⁷¹. Indeed, Clare is still erroneously thought by many today to have been at

⁶⁹ Cfr. Thomas of Eccleston, *Liber de adventu fratrum minorum in Angliam*, 68, in *Monumenta Franciscana*, ed. J.S. Brewer, I, Rolls Series, London 1858, pp. 1-73, consult. in Ital. trans. in *L'insediamento dei frati minori in Inghilterra di Tommaso da Eccleston*, in *Fonti Francescane*, Padova 1990, pp. 2011-2090 at p. 2052.

⁷⁰ A. Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Âge d'après les procès de canonisation et les documents hagiographiques*, Rome 1981), in Ital. trans. *La santità nel Medioevo*, Bologna 1989 cit. in Bartoli, *Chiara, Una donna* cit., p. 13. See also Johnson, *Clare of Assisi: A Woman of Spirit*, cit. p. 169.

⁷¹ Cfr. Bartoli *Chiara, Una donna* cit., pp. 149-50.

least a countess⁷². Erroneously, but understandably, for Francis himself certainly contributed to the on-going tradition of this misnomer inasmuch as the very same term that he used for them, *pauperes Dominae* (the poor Ladies) encapsulated the very essence of feudal nobility to which he himself had formerly aspired⁷³. If, however, it is true that the men of the Thirteenth century attributed a sacred, exceptional value to regality, no matter how this may have been construed⁷⁴, how regal, saintly and exceptional must Agnes, a princess of a royal blood line and empress-to-be, have seemed to the eyes of Clare and all of Christendom?

Agnes's father, Přemysl Otakar (1198-1230), was king of Bohemia and belonged to the illustrious dynasty of the Přemyslides (10th cent. – 1306). In her veins ran the very essence of that Great Moravia that had been converted to Christianity in 863 by two brothers, the Slavic Apostles, Constantine (alias Cyril) and Methodius. Her direct ancestor, duke Wenceslaus (907-c.935), supported by his grandmother, Ludmilla, are still venerated today as

⁷² Only Filippa, daughter to Leonardo di Gislerio, lord of Sassorosso, and Francesca, daughter to Capitaneo di Coldimezzo, were noble in the feudal sense of the term. The rest of Clare's companions, including Clare herself, were simply of 'respectable' families. On the presence of true nobility in Saint Damian's, cfr. Casagrande, *Le compagne* cit., *passim*, esp. pp.394-95. In the *Process of canonisation*, it is only in the one deposition by messere Ranieri di Bernardo of Assisi that we glean any specific reference to supposed nobility: *PrCa* 18, 4, 2505: «Et la predicta madonna Chiara fo de li più nobili de la città de Assesi da ciascuna parte, de padre et de madre. – Adomandato come sapeasse le predicte cose, respuse che era publico per tucta la contrada». Cfr. also *PrCa* 16, 3; 19, 2-4; & 20, 4-5 cit. in Frugoni, *Una solitudine abitata*, cit., p. 86. On the supposed nobility of Clare's first companions, cfr. also C. Gennaro, *Chiara, Agnese e le prime consorelle: dalle «pauperes dominae» di S. Damiano alle clarisse*, in *Movimento religioso femminile e francescanesimo nel secolo XIII*, Atti del VII Convegno internazionale della Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani (Assisi, 11-13 ottobre 1979), Assisi 1980, pp. 169-91, repr. in *Mistiche e devote nell'Italia tardo medievale*, cur. D. Bornstein, R. Rusconi, Napoli 1992, pp. 37-56, cit. in Bartoli, *Chiara, Una donna* cit., p. 74; Frugoni, *Una solitudine abitata* cit., pp. 7, 202 n.16.

⁷³ Frugoni adroitly stresses the fact that Francis "wanted to climb the social ladder, become a knight and marry a girl of noble birth". Nobility, socially no longer obtainable with the decline of the feudal system, remained, nevertheless, a value which could find realisation and confirmation in the spiritual sphere. See Frugoni, *ivi*, p. 8.

⁷⁴ A. Marini, *Agnese di Boemia*, Bibliotheca seraphico-capuccina 38, Roma 1991, p. 39.

patron saints in the Czech Republic and Slovakia because of their untiring work in evangelisation and political unification, which had ultimately led to their respective deaths as martyrs for Christianity and their country. Agnes's family also prided itself on having an ancestor in Boleslaus (929-967), who had enlarged the dukedom of Bohemia thus making it the most important state in central Europe. Her paternal grandfather, Vladislaus, was the second duke of Bohemia by that name, but became its first king, in 1158, upon receiving the regal crown directly from the emperor Frederick Barbarossa. In 1198 the hereditary title of King of Bohemia was conferred to Agnes's father by the leader of the main party contending for imperial succession, Philip of Swabia. The hereditary nature of the title was then ratified by Innocent III in 1204. On 26 September 1212, the year of Clare's escape to the Portiuncula, Agnes's father was bestowed the Golden Bull of Sicily by Emperor Frederick II, which effectively sealed the hereditary title for Přemysl Otakar and his successors and thus determined the rights and duties of the Bohemian monarchs towards the Empire. It was precisely on such premises that, in 1355, a not-too-distant descendant, one Wenceslaus, would indeed become emperor by the name of Charles IV⁷⁵. In other words, Agnes was not merely a princess from an otherwise obscure country north of the Alps somewhere in central Europe. Quite to the contrary, on her father's side alone, she came from a royal house that could legitimately cast more than the odd desirous glance towards the imperial throne. Through her paternal blood she was already cast in the role of future empress of all of Christendom and quite beyond.

Her maternal ancestry too was no less dazzling. Her mother, Constance, was daughter to the king of Hungary, Béla III (c. 1148 – 1196). Duke of Croatia and Dalmatia from 1161 to 1163, he had been elevated to King of Hungary and Croatia in 1172 and had remained so until his death. Educated at the Court of the Byzantine Emperor, Manuel I, who had initially considered him his heir and successor until the birth of his own blood son, Béla was thus supported by both the emperor at Constantinople

⁷⁵ For a complete background information on Agnes's family cfr. Marini, *ivi*; L. Pellegrini, *I quadri e i tempi dell'espansione dell'Ordine*, in *Francesco d'Assisi e il primo secolo* cit., pp. 165-201 at pp. 185-87; and Pozzi & Rima, pp. 33-35.

and pope Alexander III at Rome. He effectively became one of the most powerful rulers in the history of Hungary and, in his day, one of the wealthiest monarchs in Europe.

Furthermore, this same family could already boast more than one saint in its midst. Agnes's first cousin, Elisabeth, was to become saint Elisabeth of Hungary and patron saint of the Secular Franciscan Order. As such, she was to be depicted in a fresco by Simone Martini in the Lower Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi⁷⁶. Born in 1207, by 1221 Elisabeth had already been promised to be married to Ludwig IV, landgrave of Thuringia. Her future husband held court in the castle of Wartburg which, among other things, became famous for its cultural resonance with the presence of minnesangers. Here she gave her young husband three children and, when not impeded by the chores and duties of motherhood and marriage, dedicated her time to prayer. An idyll soon to be interrupted by a call to arms, between the Fourth and Fifth Crusades, Ludwig IV was summoned by Andrew II of Hungary and Leopold VI of Austria to go as crusader to the Holy Land. Here Ludwig would find only desolation and his ultimate death, but he was not the only one in his family to encounter violent brutality. Elisabeth was left to contend with her in-laws who, upon learning of their kinsman's death, sought to deprive her of the castle at Wartburg and her husband's other worldly possessions. A period thus followed during which Elisabeth had to fight in order to ensure a future and a life for her children. Keeping little or nothing for herself, she donated her own belongings to the poor and built a large hospital at Marburg. To be understood in the medieval sense of 'hospice for the needy, whether poor, ill or simple pilgrims', this hospital was the showcase of Elisabeth's Franciscan nature. Here she would personally take care of the ill in whom she saw, in true Franciscan fashion, the face of the humbled Christ. Numerous anecdotes, which were to become part of her *Legenda*⁷⁷, depict her carrying the poorest and most repugnant of the ill towards their make-

⁷⁶ Cfr. Frugoni, *Una solitudine abitata* cit., p. 110. For the rapid diffusion of worship for this new Franciscan saint, see L. Temperini, *Santa Elisabetta d'Ungheria nelle fonti storiche del Duecento*, Padova 2008.

⁷⁷ Jacopo of Voragine, *Golden Legend* consult. in Iacopo da Varazze, *Legenda aurea*, ed. A. Vitale Brovarone, Torino 1995, 158, pp. 922-41.

shift beds or caressing their filth-encrusted hair in the act of cutting it. This *mater pauperum*, 'mother of the poor', as they called her, died at the age of twenty-four in 1231, exalted as the first Franciscan Tertiary in German-speaking Europe, owning only the tattered dress she was wearing. This same dress, a veritable cowl, grey with patched-up sleeves and a hooded cloak, also acted as her shroud. Sharply contrasting, however, with the poverty of her burial attire, she was laid to rest in Marburg wearing a gold crown, provided by Frederick II himself, in a tomb lined with gold and silver. The service was celebrated before the entire German aristocracy and thousands of German subjects⁷⁸. Only three years went by before pope Gregory IX canonised the famous landgrave who became not only the patron saint of the Secular Franciscan Order, alongside Saint Louis of the French, but also, understandably, the patron saint of bakers and hospital workers.

Like her cousin, Elisabeth of Hungary, already a wife and mother at the age of fifteen, Agnes too ineluctably found herself the object of international, dynastic exchange. Actually, in her case, it happened even earlier. At only three years of age was Agnes betrothed to a certain Boleslav, son to the duke of Silesia, Henry the Bearded, who was to become Duke of Greater Poland in 1233. His mother was Hedwig, destined to be canonised herself in 1267. Respecting a centuries-old custom, Agnes was sent to live in the land of her future husband and spent some years at the Cistercian monastery at Trzebnica, founded by Hedwig, learning the local language and ways of life. In 1216, however, Boleslav died and so Agnes returned home to Prague where she continued her education at Doksany, a monastery her family had founded just outside the city to the north. Here she learned that her ambitious father had managed to sign a marriage contract with Heinrich, son of Frederick II. An excellent catch, during the Diet of Nuremberg held in 1219 Heinrich had become *rex Romanorum*, 'King of the Romans', which effectively made him ruler over Germany, Burgundy, and northern Italy. It also meant,

⁷⁸ Frederick II used this translation for his own political end to reaffirm his sovereignty in Germany. On this point, see D. Abulafia, *Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor*, 1st edn. New York 1988, cons. in Ital. trans. *Federico II. Un imperatore medievale*, Torino 1990, pp. 206-207. Another, extremely useful, biography on the emperor is E. Kantorowicz, *Federico II Imperatore*, Milano 1994.

furthermore, that he had been designated to succeed his father on the imperial throne. Přemysl Otakar's political moves had paid off – Agnes was indeed to become empress, the *first lady* of all of Christendom.

Agnes was therefore sent forthwith to the Viennese court of Leopold VI, 'the Glorious', from the House of Babenberg, Duke of Austria from 1198 to 1230 and of Styria from 1194 to 1230. Active in the *Reconquista* of Spain, the Albigensian Crusade, the disastrous Fifth Crusade, and in mediation between Frederick II and pope Gregory IX, Leopold VI was the head of a culturally-vibrant court. Under his reign, the new Gothic style reached the Danube area, a proud example of which can still be seen in the *Cappella Speciosa* built in his temporary residence at Klosterneuburg. When he married the Byzantine princess, Theodora Angelina, his court reached even greater cultural heights. Poets such as Walther von der Vogelweide, Neidhart von Reuenthal and Ulrich von Liechtenstein were active there, and the famous epic poem, the *Nibelungenlied*, was plausibly even composed there. It is easy to imagine, therefore, how privileged and stimulating a lifestyle the young Agnes, the future empress of Western Europe, was able to enjoy.

She enjoyed it, however, for only as long as she was promised to Heinrich. The problem was, in the meantime Heinrich had laid his eyes on Isabel, the sister of Henry II of England, and had begun to think that an alliance with the Anglo-French dynasty might be a somewhat better move to make on the political chessboard of Europe. Needless to say, the contract with Otakar I was deemed no longer binding and Agnes was invited to return home to Prague⁷⁹. A period of general confusion ensued during which the contract between Heinrich and Isabel of England was also annulled and another one was hastily drawn up between Heinrich and Margareta, the daughter of Leopold of Austria and

⁷⁹ Marini, *Agnese di Boemia* cit., p. 49. For the literary description of this political game-playing with Agnes as its pawn, see, for example, the expression [Agnes] *ad paternos lares reducitur* [Agnes returns to her father's house] at *VitAg* (= *Vita Agnetis in Some New Sources for the Life of Agnes of Bohemia including a Fourteenth-Century Latin Version* (Bamburg, misc. Hist. 146, E. VII, 19) and a Fifteenth-Century German Version (Berlin, Germ. Oct. 484), ed. W.W. Seton, «British Society of Franciscan Studies», 7 (1915), p. 66.

Agnes's former companion of childhood games at Vienna. Infuriated with his former colleague and close ally, for Otakar such an outrage constituted a justifiable *casus belli*.

The scene did not, however, end here for yet another *coup de théâtre* was to arrive soon afterwards. Around 1227, Henry III of England, the boy-king, was finally granted full powers of kingship and thus decided to seek allies against his main rival, the House of France. Darting a quick look around the eligible maidens of Europe's leading houses he ascertained that Agnes of Prague was still free. Even better, her wealthy father, Otakar I, might have been able to back him up on the continent both militarily and financially, thus sandwiching Henry's French cousins and ensuring his hold on the English throne. He thus sought to procure a contract at once. However, either because of the influence of his Provençal courtiers, or because of his gauche dealings with the English barons, or even perhaps because of his own youthful arrogance regarding his justiciars, the deal with the king of Bohemia fell through and, in 1236, Henry ended up marrying someone much closer and, quite unexpectedly, more useful – Eleanor of Provence. So much for Anglo-Bohemian relations.

Despite these three marriage contracts ending in disaster, young Agnes was still in store, however, if not for the biggest surprise of her life, at least the most flattering. Let us, though, proceed step by step. Until the year 1227-28, historical records are strangely consistent regarding plans to marry Agnes off into this or that European family. That is to say, the three marriage contracts outlined above did at some time exist and were recognised as such by all parties involved. Agnes's *Legenda*, however, is a completely different story⁸⁰. Just after her death, which occurred in the month of March, 1279, this *Legenda* was prepared. Judging by the language, and notwithstanding the so-called 'transalpine' Latin, it is clear that the otherwise-anonymous amanuensis wrote with Clare's letters in mind. Indeed, similar in style, the devotional nature is also entirely analogous⁸¹. And it is in this *Legenda* that we learn of a fourth proposal of marriage

⁸⁰ Cfr. *Legenda*, ed. M. Donnini, in J. Nemec, *Agnese di Praga*, Assisi 1982, pp. 51-90.

⁸¹ For example, in *VitAg*, p.126, Agnese is presented as the «sanctissime Clare plantulam generosam» [the generous (most noble?) little plant of the most holy Clare].

that those speaking for Agnes at the time would have found very difficult indeed to refuse. We do not know whether her father had already died by this stage, or whether it was now her brother guiding the political manoeuvres. The fact is, however, that it was Agnes herself who apparently decided how to react. She was not going to be a political pawn any longer. Needless to say, hers went down in Franciscan history as a 'great refusal' indeed that shocked most and amazed everyone, for the person who had formally asked for her hand in holy matrimony was not this or that 'minor' king from the outer-lying areas of Europe, but the emperor himself, Frederick II, the *stupor mundi*⁸².

If Agnes of Prague was the perfect symbol of Clarian charisma, then Frederick II was even more eloquent a model for its terminological opposite. Frederick II had not only (allegedly) waged war on the tiny Assisi, as we saw above, but had also (presumably) become an impenitent voyeur of all things most intimately Franciscan, including conversion to the true faith. The dichotomy, as we saw above, between Frederick II and the inherent symbolism of Franciscan values and epos had already been established. And it provided the stuff of legend and literature. Indeed, the more the papacy availed itself of the growing popularity of Franciscanism in order to promulgate its basic tenets and curb heresy, the more that same dichotomy became the official lens through which reality, all reality, was viewed. In using Frederick II as her own *bête noire*, the absolute black against which to measure the purity of her white, Clare was, therefore, no different from Francis or other Franciscan writers. If dualism had plagued Augustine's thoughts eight-hundred years earlier, it was now producing seemingly naïve, yet enrapturing and deeply provocative, pages of fine Franciscan literature⁸³.

⁸² Marini, *Agnese di Boemia* cit., pp. 11-15.

⁸³ For specularity in Clare, cfr. Armstrong, *The Lady* cit., pp. 21-22. Here the allusion is to the various *specula* of the medieval tradition. Frederick II himself enjoyed being known among his courtiers as a 'mirror of virtue', etc. For example, Nicola of Bari wrote to Pier della Vigna, Frederick II's secretary: «Ipse [*scil.* Frederick II] est sol in firmamento mundi quo illuminantur homines gracia et exemplo. Magnus est, maior et maximus, magnus quia rex Sicilie, maior quia rex Iherusalem, maximus quia imperator Romanus [...] nemo illo sublimior, nemo illo humilior inve-

Returning to Agnes's stupefying answer to Frederick's proposal of marriage, it is actually not that important whether the refusal was registered or not at any particular point in the archives of the *Magna Curia* under the vigil eye of Frederick's chief secretary, Pier della Vigna. The vague allusion to it we *can* glean does, after all, belie its humiliating, almost offensive, character⁸⁴.

nitur! Hic est nobilitas gravis, orbis exemplum, decus hominum, conversationis splendor et omnis iusticie principatus», cit. in R.M. Kloos, *Nikolaus von Bari, eine neue quelle zur entwicklung der Kaiseridee unter Friedrich II*, in *Stupor mundi zur Geschichte Friedrichs II von Hohenstaufen*, ed. G.G. Woolf, Darmstadt 1982, pp. 130-160, partic. p.135. An echo of such thirteenth-century panegyric literature, which had attributed the epithet of 'mirror of the world' or *speculum mundi* to the *stupor mundi*, Frederick II, was included in the anonymous, mid-fourteenth-century *Novellino*. *Videlicet*: I Novella proemiale: «[...] li nobili e gentili sono nel parlare e nell'opere quasi com'uno specchio appo li minori [...] E chi avrà cuore nobile et intelligenza sottile sì li potrà somigliare per lo tempo che verrà per innanzi, et argomentare e dire e raccontare in quelle parti dove avranno luogo, a prode et a piacere di coloro che non sanno e desiderano di sapere»; *ibid.* 1, 1: «Quando lo nostro Signore Gesù Cristo parlava umanamente con noi, in fra l'altre sue parole ne disse che dell'abbondanza del cuore parla la lingua. Voi ch'avete i cuori gentili e nobili in fra li altri, acconciate le vostre menti e le vostre parole»; *ibid.* 2, 1: «Presto Giovanni, nobilissimo signore indiano, mandòe ricca e nobile ambasceria al nobile e potente Imperatore Federigo, a colui che veramente fu specchio del mondo in parlare e in costumi, e amò dilicato parlare, et istudiò in dare savi risponsi». On this tradition, cfr. G. Brugnoli, *Stupor mundi «colui ch'a tutto 'l mondo fè paura»*, in *Giorgio Brugnoli. Studi di filologia e letteratura italiana*, edd. S. Conte, F. Stok, Pisa 2004, pp. 197-212, partic. p. 197.

⁸⁴ Marini, *Agnese di Boemia* cit., pp. 52-53. Cfr. also *Historisch-diplomatische Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters. IV. Über die Formelsammlung des Rudolf von Tours*, ed. H. Simonsfeld, «Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-philologischen und der historischen Klasse der k.b. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu München», 50 (1898), Bd. I, 440, cit. in Marini, *Agnese di Boemia* cit., p. 53 n. 35. For Gregory IX's allusion to Agnes's refusal to marry Frederick II in his letter of 7 June, 1235, sent from Perugia to Beatrix, Queen of Castille and Toledo, on the death of saint Elisabeth of Hungary four years beforehand, see *Bullarium Franciscanum Romanorum Pontificum constitutiones, epistolas, ac diplomata continens tribus ordinibus Minorum, Clarissarum, et Poenitentium a seraphico patriarcha Sancto Francisco institutis concessa*, Romae 1759, I pp. 164-167, partic. pp. 165-166: «Inebriasti quoque poculo vasis huius Agnetem ancillam Christi, virginem, natam Regis Boemiae sororem tuam, in cuius aetate tenera, et rebus asperis experimur coelestis con-

Besides, these are years in which any particular king, or even the emperor himself, could ask for the hand of several different eligible maidens at any one time and simply choose the most profitable solution. The refusal of one or another father to consent to give his daughter away in marriage, because of prior or more advantageous commitments, might create, at most, a slight stir at court, much less in chancery archives. In this particular period, however, that is, in the years 1228-29, Frederick desperately needed to secure reliable allies. His wife, Yolande (also known as Isabella) of Brienne, Queen of Jerusalem, had just given birth to his famous son, Conrad, on 25 April, 1228, but had died soon afterwards. This had left him with a kingdom to re-conquer for his son (and for himself), but no one to fight with him. He needed fresh alliances, and he needed them fast⁸⁵.

It is more than plausible, then, that Hohenstaufen political strategy did actually look to Bohemia at the end of the third decade of the Thirteenth century as an area in which to make its next move. The fact that no record of this is extant in the imperial archives, as was mentioned above, is not that indicative. Agnes's refusal to accept Frederick's proposal would not have created but the slightest raising of Pier della Vigna's eyebrows before being quickly dismissed. In Franciscan circles, on the other

versationis insignia; ita ut Imperialis culminis oblata fastigia fugiens iam procedat obviam sponso suo, accensis lampadibus Choro sacrarum Virginum comitata. Opus excelsi; Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti fuit opus operatum et operans» (With the cup of this container [Elisabeth] You also inebriated Agnes, the unspoiled handmaid of Christ, daughter to the king of Bohemia and your sister, in whose young age we find the signs of heavenly conversion amid bitter events. So much so that, fleeing the dazzling wealth offered by His Imperial Highness, she is already proceeding towards her Spouse, accompanied by a choir of consecrated virgins with torches lit. Work of the Lord on high. This was work carried out by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and is still continuing). See also *Annales Stadenses*, MGH, SS, 16, p. 363.

⁸⁵ For the period around 1229, cfr. Delle Donne, *Federico II* cit., pp. 25-28, 104-16; Francesconi, *Storia, profezia, mito* cit., pp. 843-844. On the wedding plans and the unusual way in which Frederick married the fourteen-year-old Iolanda, cfr. the entry 'crociata', cur. G. Musca, in *Enciclopedia Fridericiana*, Roma 2005, pp. 401-416, partic. p. 405. For a discussion of the dubious legitimacy of Frederick's appropriation of the title of 'King of Jerusalem', cfr. Abulafia, *Frederick II* cit., p. 144. For the self-crowning as malicious defamation, see Delle Donne, *Federico II* cit., pp. 28, 61.

hand, it created quite a stir to say the least. Agnes's 'no' immediately became a jubilant and a very well-documented 'yes', not just because one more woman of high rank was about to enter the Franciscan Order, but precisely because of what Agnes and Frederick II symbolically represented. And here, give or take this or that polemical remark, the historical sources and the historiographical reconstructions are all strangely unanimous. That someone should, and indeed could, say 'no' to the *Stupor mundi* was purely and simply astonishing.

Regarding the most-coveted Holy Land, Clare had her own eye-witness accounts of what it meant. The Clarian sources recount unabashedly and unequivocally that Ortolana, Clare's mother, had actually been there⁸⁶. Even though Jerusalem had been lost to Christendom on 21 October 1187, it has been convincingly hypothesized that Ortolana had nevertheless been able to travel along the passage from the coast to the holy city left open to such pilgrims by al-Kāmil as a legacy of the great esteem in which he held not emperor Frederick Barbarossa, but the English king, Richard the Lion Heart. Ever since this great loss of the holy city to the Saracens, however, the Christian West had been praying fervently for its full liberation. The Cistercians were the first to introduce prayers for such liberation into their daily liturgy. It was with the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), however, that these prayers became common practice right throughout Christendom. As a result, all Christians everywhere, including the tiny community of Poor Ladies led by Clare, would weep bitter tears every day over the loss of Jerusalem and for its liberation. Prayers were cried out by the thousands in the hope that the Lord might «tear away from the hands of the enemies of the Cross the ground that the Only Begotten Son of God consecrated with His own blood»⁸⁷. No feeble desire by any measure, this collective, reiterated prayer, recited daily also by Clare and her sisters,

⁸⁶ Cfr. *LegCl*, prol. 1, p.2416: «Ultra mare siquidem cum peregrinantibus devota transivit [*scil.* Ortolana], et loca illa perlustrans, quae Deus homo sacris vestigiis consecrat, tandem cum gaudio remeavit».

⁸⁷ S.A. van Dijk, O.F.M., *The Breviary of Saint Clare*, «Franciscan Studies», 8 (1948), pp. 25-46, 351-387, partic. pp. 365-66, transcribes: fol. 264r. «Domine exercituum ps. Deus venerunt gentes. Kyrieleyson. Pater noster. Et ne nos. V Exurgat deus. Non nobis domine non nobis. Salvum fac. Fiat pax. Esto. Oratio. Deus qui ammirabili providentia dencia [*sic*]

including her own mother and former pilgrim, Ortolana, must have been emotionally involving, heart-wrenching prayer at its most fervent.

By 1226, this touching part of daily liturgy had become public outcry. And the call was for someone to step in and do something about it. Troubadours wrote lyrics in both early Italian and in the more established and prestigious Provençal language in order to invite some *veltro*, as Dante would say a century later, a vindicator, to appear and right all wrongs⁸⁸. Needless to say, the person who answered the call was Frederick II. Though with some initial reluctance, which resulted in yet another bull of excommunication, the end-result *was* simply stupefying. Realising that al-Kāmil only wanted Jerusalem in order to ensure his hold over Egypt, Frederick II managed to convince the qādi, or Muslim governor, of Jerusalem, Shams al-Dīn, to hand over the keys to the city. Thus, without spilling any blood whatsoever on either side, the diplomatically-successful Frederick paraded his Christian troops into the once-Muslim city reclaiming it for Christendom and himself. Positive amazement turning the day after into bewilderment, on March 17, 1229, Frederick marched into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and, at only thirty-five years of age, *nel mezzo del cammin*, purportedly crowned himself not only King of Jerusalem, but also the foremost representative on Earth of Christ Himself. This was an achievement judged by his own contemporaries to be simply ‘staggering’⁸⁹.

cun[c]ta disponis. Te suppliciter exaremurus [sic] ut terram quam inigenitus [sic] filius tuus proprio sanguine consecrav[it]. De manibus inimicorum crucis eripias. Ipsam quoque restituas cultui christiano ad laudem et gloriam nomini[s] tui. Vota fidelium qui ad eius liberationem insistunt. Misericorditer dirigendo in viam salutis eterne. Per eundem dominum nostrum». Cfr. also Rotzetter, *Chiara d'Assisi* cit., p. 195.

⁸⁸ For the presence of the troubadours Elias de Barjols and Falquet de Romans, cfr. Musca cit., p. 405. For Dante's *veltro* as an anagram of *ultore* – vindicator, see R. Lokaj, *Il veltro dantesco quale anagramma di 'ultore'*, «Giornale Italiano di Filologia», 54/1 (2002), pp. 15-27.

⁸⁹ Cfr. Abulafia, *Frederick II* cit., p. 162; For background reading on several related topics, see *Stupor mundi sur Geschichte Fredericks II. von Hohenstaufen*, ed. G.G. Wolf, Darmstadt 1982; E.W. Wies, *Friedrich II. von Hohenstaufen Messias oder Antichrist*, München 1994, especially the chapter on his supposed self-coronation equating him to both Alexander the Great and

And truly staggering it was. This self-proclaimed king of the earth and universe, the heir at once of Caesar, Alexander and David, who held in one hand the unified empire of Rome and, in the other, the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, was truly the Anointed One⁹⁰. He represented in his own person all the glory and achievements of ancient Roman tradition. He also represented *Sacerdotium* in all its declensions in the Hebrew-Christian tradition. He was now king of that holiest of holy cities, Jerusalem, that point of conjunction between Heaven and earth within the realm of men. He was at the height of his physical prowess, military career, nobility and wealth. In other terms, he was, in his own newly-found conception, Roman emperor and vicar of God called to preside over the dealings of all mortal men. And yet, when he, in such an all-mighty position, asked for Agnes's hand in marriage, even more staggeringly did she find the courage not to answer his call. She said no⁹¹.

Agnes: a penitential programme

The courage to say no, to enact a «great refusal»⁹² as pope Celestinus V was to do at the end of that same century also leaving the many appalled and reeling, was a matter of nobility of spirit, and this in turn, at least in Agnes's case, was also a question of name. The age-old adage *nomen est consequentia rerum* now perhaps becoming the more pertinent *res sunt consequentia nominis*, the plight of Agnes of Prague was already written.

Among the «richiami occulti» detected by padre Pozzi⁹³ that Clare had adroitly embroidered into her prose, such as the above-mentioned Pauline term *bravium*, there are also several citations taken from, or intertexts based on, the *Passio sanctae Agnetis*. Scholars of Franciscan studies have long since discovered that

King David, pp. 146-152; C. Dal Monte, *Federico II di Svevia. Una vita per il Sacro Romano Impero*, Foggia 2002; Delle Donne, *Federico II* cit., pp. 25-28.

⁹⁰ The symbolic formulation of Frederick II's 'capture' of Jerusalem is discussed in Wies, *Friedrich II* cit., pp. 156-158.

⁹¹ The news instilled amazement in the otherwise quiet cells of Saint Damian's. See, on this point, Rotzetter, *Chiara d'Assisi* cit., pp. 249 ff. Cfr., on this point, R. Zavalloni, *La personalità di Chiara d'Assisi. Studio psicologico*, Assisi 1993, p. 40.

⁹² Cfr. the «gran rifiuto» at *If.* III 58-60.

⁹³ Pozzi & Rima, p. 248.

the simple fact that Clare was writing to a Bohemian princess by this name, Agnes, was enough to trigger memories of the famous late-antique account of martyrdom and recall certain expressions which she had either heard or read concerning it. A spontaneous association of names would seem to be at play. Though plausible, perhaps it would be more fruitful, however, to hypothesize a less passive intellectual process at work and posit, instead, a slightly more conscious effort on Clare's part. That is to say, the association at hand may have been triggered by Agnes's name, but also by *register*. The *Passion of Saint Agnes* afforded a readily-available pool of expressions appropriate to the register of nobility, martyrdom and female sacrifice, which Agnes of Prague deserved in her status, her life choice and her recent profession of faith. By using not only name, but also analogy in female experience, between Late Antiquity and the Later Middle Ages, in her writing strategy Clare could not have achieved a better match between nobility of lineage and nobility of spirit.

The cultural association we see working here between Late Antiquity and the Later Middle Ages points out once again just how keenly aware Clare was of her position not only in history but also in the *longue durée* of heroic acts constituting the *sequela Christi*. By seeing St Agnes, the ancient martyr, rediviva in Agnes of Prague, then the implicit association is not a question of *res nova*, which, in Clare's time, might easily have constituted heterodoxy, but *renovatio*. *Renovatio*, after all, just as Francis had envisaged it in his form of life and resolution to follow Christ exactly as the Apostles had done, consisted in 'making the old new again' by reliving it and re-introducing it into contemporary reality. It must also be said, however, that Clare was not alone in this keen awareness, or tendency to *renovare*, for Gregory IX too, the former cardinal protector of the Franciscan movement, had often likened Agnes of Prague to the homonymous Roman martyr⁹⁴. Given the wide-spread popularity of the *Legenda sanctae Agnetis*, associations of this nature must have been fairly routine indeed.

What was not routine was the association Francis had made between the name Agnes and Christ as *Agnus Dei* – the Lamb of God. Francis himself had spontaneously re-baptised Caterina, Clare's own sister, with the name Agnes, because he had seen

⁹⁴ Alberzoni, *Rassegne. Chiara d'Assisi* cit., p. 444.

how defiantly and courageously she had remained liege to her decision to follow her sister, Clare, into her new profession of faith. In Francis's eyes, this presented Caterina as a 'follower of the Lamb', worthy, therefore, of the name Agnes⁹⁵. No isolated phenomenon, therefore, as Francis was rather fond of re-baptising many of his newly-found brothers and sisters. Turning their most salient positive or negative traits from adjectives into 'speaking names', Francis had welcomed brothers Pacifico and Umile into his penitential movement because they had always been, respectively, 'most serene' and 'most humble' in the world⁹⁶. Conversely, upon accepting into the movement a notorious bandit whom everyone in the Casentino around La Verna called 'Lupo' (Wolf) because of his ferocity, Francis had re-baptised him with the name 'Agnello' (Lamb). Francis thereby represented, through Lupo's new name, the converting/inverting character of his second baptism. In Caterina's case, how better to represent her resolute decision to stick by her elder sister, even when close relatives and fellow citizens violently endeavoured to steal her away, than to give her the penitential, and yet, triumphant, baptismal name of Agnes, the follower of the Lamb?⁹⁷

Furthermore, as *consequentia nominis* and not only, therefore, as *consequentia rerum*, could the prophecy inherent in the name fail to come true. Caterina, now Agnes, etymologically 'devout', that is, 'promised' to the Lamb, was considered by many to be a saint

⁹⁵ *Chron. XXIV General.*, in *Analecta Franciscana*, III, 175 (cit. in Bartoli, *Chiara, Una donna* cit., p. 71 n. 9, and Rotzetter, *Chiara d'Assisi* cit., p. 90): «Post haec [omnia mala facta] vero beatus Franciscus ipsam manibus suis totondit et hoc nomen, scilicet Agnes, sibi imposuit, quia pro innocente Agno, scilicet Iesu Cristo, qui pro nobis immolatus est, fortiter restitit et viriliter dimicavit. Crevit autem stans in Religione in omni bona conversatione et sanctitate, ita ut omnibus cum ea degentibus vita ipsius et conversatio quasi novum quid et supra humanum statum admirantibus videretur». For the equation Caterina = Agnese, cfr. also Alberzoni, *Chiara di Assisi e il francescanesimo femminile* cit., p. 210. For a bibliography on the *Chron. XXIV General.* and its attribution to Arnaldo di Sarrant, cfr. M.T. Dolso, *La Cronica XXIV Generalium Il difficile percorso dell'unità nella storia francescana*, Padova 2003; Accrocca, *Chiara e l'Ordine Franciscano* cit., p. 373 n. 149.

⁹⁶ Cfr. *Fioretti* 46, in *Fonti Francescane*, Padova 1990, pp. 1441-1624, partic. pp. 1556-1557.

⁹⁷ Cfr. *LegCl* 24-26, pp. 2429-2431.

even in this life⁹⁸. In the *Legenda sanctae Clarae Virginis*, following her sister even in death, the anonymous amanuensis ratifies the association between Caterina-Agnes and Christ the Lamb⁹⁹. Similarly for Agnes of Prague. The scribe who compiled her *Legenda* speaks of an explicit association between the Bohemian princess and the «Lamb without spot or stain», here described in the words of St Peter¹⁰⁰. In the very moment in which the parties gathered to draw up the marriage contract between Heinrich, Frederick II's son, and Agnes, no one could remember the name of the girl to be betrothed¹⁰¹. This hesitation, which must have been rather embarrassing for all concerned, effectively prevented the notary from continuing with the business at hand. A fourteenth-century account thus reads:

A short time later, through messengers, she [*scil.* Agnes] is asked for as a future wife by emperor Frederick's son and is thus promised to the said youth by her parents via the aforementioned messengers. In this betrothal, something occurred which we should not pass over in silence. That is, during the very same act of betrothing, no one among those gathered could remember the famous name of the maiden, which was known to just about everybody. Through this event it became clear that Agnes was not to be married via perpetual agreement to any mortal man, but to the Lamb without spot or stain in whose book her name had already been fully inscribed¹⁰².

⁹⁸ Agnes, Clare's carnal sister, is painted with a halo around her head in the Basilica of Saint Clare in Assisi meaning "immediate fame of saintliness". On this point, cfr. Frugoni, *Una solitudine abitata* cit., pp. 124-125.

⁹⁹ *LegCl*, 48, 7, p. 2442: «Paucis interiectis diebus [*scil.* post Clarae mortem], Agnes ad Agni nuptias evocata, sororem Claram ad aeternas delicias subsecuta est: ubi ambae Sion filiae, natura, gratia et regno germanae, et Deo iubilant sine fine».

¹⁰⁰ *1Pt.* 1, 19: «pretioso sanguine quasi agni incontaminati et immaculati Christi».

¹⁰¹ Cfr. Nemec, *Agnese di Praga* cit., p. 59.

¹⁰² *VitAg*, 68: «Tempore tandem aliquo interiecto, ab imperatoris Frederici filio per inter nuncios postulatur in coniugem et a parentibus dicto iuveni mediantibus prefatis nunciis desponsatur. In qua desponsacione quoddam contingit non tacendum. Nam nomen virginis celebre quod pene omnibus erat notum, in ipsa desponsacione nullus astancium valuit recordari, ut hoc clareret indicio quod non homini mortali sed agno sine macula, in cuius libro nomen eius memoriter scriptum erat, Agnes federe perpetuo esset copulanda» (my trans.).

This example of medieval *desponsatio* or betrothing, no matter how entertaining or concocted *a posteriori*, is just like any other type of contract setting out the terms and conditions of the exchange of goods and payment, even where one of these goods just happens to be a girl. As a legal transaction, the *nominatio rerum* must be included, that is, the goods to be given over and paid for must be itemised and expressly listed, together with their prices. If this does not occur, then the contract is simply unintelligible and not binding, in which case, the marriage cannot take place. Whether such a lull in the proceedings did in fact occur, creating not only embarrassment but also uneasy concern as to the other, more divine, destiny awaiting the unknowing piece of merchandise, we shall never know. What is certain is, because of her name Agnes, 'she who follows the Lamb', her biographer well understood that a betrothal had already taken place in Heaven which had definitely not been to the exuberant, scheming and over-ambitious son of the Hohenstaufen household.

Given that the association between the name Agnes and the Lamb of God also coloured hagiographical accounts north of the Alps among German-speaking peoples, obviously the phenomenon cannot be considered to be a prerogative of some bizarre Italian mindset or, worse still, an affectation confined only to Assisi and the Valley of Spoleto. Quite to the contrary, in early Franciscanism, on both sides of the Alps, the name Agnes seems to have triggered, freely and spontaneously, an association with both the *Agnus Dei* of the New Testament and the martyr Agnes of Late Antiquity. In all cases of such association, the name Agnes was perceived to be a 'talking name' that spoke of a prophecy. That prophecy was to commit the ultimate sacrifice, whether in terms of possessions, status or even one's own blood, and follow Christ into a life of penance and perfect joy.

On the one hand, therefore, Agnes of Prague had already been promised for a life of penitential humility. Clare, on the other, exulting upon hearing the news, though confined to the relative silence of Saint Damian's, was not obliged to keep quiet about it. Clare knew, but so did all of Christendom, who Agnes of Prague was and what this would mean for the Clare's own mission and the Franciscan Order at large. The second-person plural used by Clare in the first letter she sent to Agnes is not only due to the difference in social class, that is, a sign of register as normally codified in the *artes dictandi*. It also represents Clare's

deep deference for the fact that the leading courts of Europe, which cultivated international relations and the arts, were now providing the cohorts of Heaven with new warriors recruited not only from Italy, but also from those sundry, far-off lands north of the Alps. It is no coincidence that Clare should begin her correspondence with Agnes in the very year in which Elisabeth of Hungary, Agnes of Prague's first cousin, is canonised. The Houses of Hungary and Bohemia were not only providing the stuff of earthly princes and kings, but now also the leaders of God's heavenly armies.

Though *sub specie humilitatis*, Clare's exultation for the astonishing news never really diminishes over the twenty-year period in which the two Franciscan women wrote to each other. To the contrary, it becomes the very key for understanding *why* she wove into the fabric of her prose those «richiami occulti» that padre Pozzi had first identified. Indeed, every one of these hidden allusions can now be read as worthy of this once 'First Lady-to-be' of Christendom. If, on the one hand, their allusive function polemically denounces the arrogance of the world as represented in the person of Frederick II, on the other, they exalt the spiritual programme of Clarian charisma, devotion and humility that Agnes figuratively represents.

Clare, against the Empire?

According to Lombardi, Clare composed her first letter to Agnes of Prague in 1228¹⁰³. Following the reconstruction posited by Pozzi and Rima, however, it is more likely that the letter was written on, or around, 11 June, 1234, when Agnes entered the Franciscan monastery that she herself had had built¹⁰⁴. Uncertainty, therefore, still exists in scholarly debate. Such uncertainty, however, does not alter the substance of the matter. That is to say, when Agnes said 'no' to Frederick II and decided, instead, to follow the Lamb and Clare into the cloister, it was in-

¹⁰³ Cfr. Lombardi, *Santa Chiara di Assisi* cit., p. 197.

¹⁰⁴ For the dating of this and the other three letters to Agnes, see E. Grau OFM, *Die Schriften der heiligen Klara und die Werke ihrer Biographen*, in *Movimento religioso femminile* cit., pp. 193-238, partic. pp. 201-202; Pozzi & Rima, p. 99.

deed the first time in her entire life that she had been acting according to her own will and conscience¹⁰⁵. For sure that will and conscience had been encouraged and given wings in the new atmosphere of chivalry and spiritual renewal brought to her home town by the first Franciscans to arrive there in 1225. Back then her dear old father, Otakar I, had even been moved to build a church and monastery for them. Since then, however, she had heard tales of the wonders being worked by that mysterious couple, Francis and Clare, in a tiny city in Umbria, just north of Rome. Among the miracles being performed, unassuming, country churches were being rebuilt to suggest that the Church itself needed repair and, the greatest miracle of all, nothing was being asked in return. This fact alone promised to be much greater than anything Frederick II could possibly have given her as a husband. Consequently, and we might also say significantly, on the day of Pentecost, 1234, Agnes took the veil and became at once Clare's daughter and sister¹⁰⁶. Clare in turn, both subject and lowly handmaiden, exulting and astonished together with the rest of the known world, learned that Agnes had refused the imperial veil to become betrothed, instead, to Christ. Agnes's decision being a choice between two extremes, Clare opens her first letter and reveals that the constant epistolary motif of the entire letter collection will indeed be a question of implicit opposition.

To the venerable and most holy maiden, Lady Agnes, daughter of the most excellent and most illustrious King of Bohemia, Clare, an unworthy lady-in-waiting of Jesus Christ and useless handmaiden of the ladies dwelling within the Monastery of Saint Damian's, her subject and handmaiden in all things, [sends] her every recommendation with truly sincere reverence that she may attain the glory of everlasting happiness.

Upon hearing the fame of Your saintly conversion and Your life conduct, a fame that has reached not only my ears, but also those of practically the entire world bringing You so much honour, I greatly rejoice and exult in the Lord. Actually it is not I alone who can exult in this occasion, but all those who serve and desire to serve Jesus Christ. And it is because of this: seeing that You, more than anyone else, could have enjoyed the magnificence, the honours, and all the favours the world had to offer, being able, as You

¹⁰⁵ Marini, *Agnese di Boemia* cit., p. 55.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

were, to be gloriously and legitimately joined in holy matrimony with our most eminent, illustrious Caesar, as indeed would have been fitting for Your and His Excellency, but shunning, however, all these things, with resolution and heart-felt conviction, You preferred a holier poverty and bodily want. You accepted a Spouse of higher lineage, the Lord Jesus Christ, who [I hope] will always guard over Your virginity keeping it untainted and out of harm's way¹⁰⁷.

In this first letter, Clare confers two values to the appellative «sponsa» (bride, spouse). The first derives from the earliest of Christian times during which it designated the maidens consecrated to Christ, as in the case of the martyr Agnes, «nupta Christo»¹⁰⁸, modelled in turn on the Pauline «virgo casta Christo»¹⁰⁹. The other derives from the Old Testament tradition of the *Song of Songs*, as the chosen bride of Him Who prefigured the One Who was to come¹¹⁰. Combining such derivations, Clare's opening paragraph is skillfully built around a series of oppositions

¹⁰⁷ *1EC*11-7: «Venerabili et sanctissimae virgini, dominae Agneti, filiae excellentissimi ac illustrissimi regis Bohemiae, Clara indigna famula Iesu Christi et ancilla inutilis dominarum inclusarum monasterii Sancti Damiani, sua ubique subdita et ancilla, recommendationem sui omnimodam cum reverentia speciali aeternae felicitatis gloriam adipisci. Vestrae sanctae conversationis et vitae honestissimam famam audiens, quae non solum mihi, sed fere in toto est orbe terrarum egregie divulgata, gaudeo plurimum in Domino et exsulto; de quo non tantum ego singularis valeo exsultare, sed universi qui faciunt et facere desiderant servitium Iesu Christi. Hinc est, quod, cum perfrui potuissetis prae ceteris pompis et honoribus et saeculi dignitate, cum gloria excellenti valentes inclito Caesari legitime desponsari, sicut vestrae ac eius excellentiae decuisset; quae omnia respuentes, toto animo et cordis affectu magis sanctissimam paupertatem et corporis penuriam elegistis, sponsum nobilioris generis accipientes, Dominum Iesum Christum, qui vestram virginitatem semper immaculatam custodiet et illaesam». The translation is mine, but I am grateful to J. Mueller, *Clare's Letters to Agnes. Texts and Sources*, New York, 2001 *ad loc.* and, esp., Armstrong, *The Lady* cit., pp. 43-44 and relative notes.

¹⁰⁸ Cfr. *Aurelii Prudentii Clementis Peristephanon Hymnus XIV Passio Agnetis* v. 79, edd. M. van Assendelft, G. Chiarini, in *Atti e Passioni dei Martiri*, edd. A.A.R. Bastiaensen *et al.*, Milano 1990 (1987), pp. 353-368, partic. p. 362.

¹⁰⁹ II Cor. 11, 2.

¹¹⁰ Pozzi & Rima, p. 41. For a discussion of the use of the *Song of Songs* in Clare's letters, such as Ct. 4, 11: «veni de Libano sponsa», etc, cfr. *Opuscula s. Francisci et Scripta s. Clarae Assisiensium*, ed. G.M. Boccali O.F.M., Assisi 1978, pp. 413-415, 455-467.

destined to characterise the entire letter-collection. That is to say, if Agnes is a 'king's daughter', then Clare is merely the 'unworthy chambermaid' or 'handmaiden'; if Agnes refused to become 'the wife of Caesar', Clare chose, instead, to mirror yet again Francis's own language for the Son and thus call Christ 'a Spouse of higher lineage'¹¹¹. Furthermore, in an exquisitely Augustinian tradition of Christian commonplace¹¹², if Agnes represents the figure of the utmost humility, then Frederick II represents the figure of the utmost arrogance. Indeed, in her second letter to Agnes of Prague, the latter-day *sponsa Christi*, Clare writes that «the King of heaven drew Agnes unto Him in His ethereal bedchamber», and that it was Agnes who had disparaged the «worldly pomp, circumstance and other offerings made to her by her imperial suitor»¹¹³. In her third letter to Agnes, Clare writes that «all the heavens could not contain» the Son whom His «sweetest mother [...] conceived in the small cloister of her sacred bosom and bore in her young womb»¹¹⁴. And yet, in the words of Job in the same letter, she writes: «In this, certain worldly kings and queens are deceived, for even though their pride may reach the skies and their heads may touch the clouds, in the end they are discarded like human waste»¹¹⁵. The game of opposites thus comes to a close. In her first letter Agnes had not acknowledged Frederick II's call to accept his proposal of marriage and thereby become queen and empress amid «the magnificence, the honours, and all

¹¹¹ For Francis's use of the same language, cfr. ICel, 7, cit. in Johnson *Clare of Assisi* cit., pp. 186-187.

¹¹² St Augustine, *doctr. christ.*, 1, 14, 13, 24-26: «sic Sapientia Dei hominem curans seipsam exhibuit ad sanandum, ipsa medicus, ipsa medicina. Quia ergo per superbiam homo lapsus est, humilitatem adhibuit ad sanandum».

¹¹³ 2ECI 5-6, p.2269: «te [*scil.* Agnes] sibi Rex ipse [*scil.* Christ] in aethereo thalamo sociabit, ubi sedet stellato solio gloriosus, quod terreni regni fastigia vilipendens et oblationes imperialis coniugii [*scil.* of Frederick] parum dignas, aemula sanctissimae paupertatis effecta in spiritu magnae humilitatis et ardentissimae caritatis eius adhaesisti vestigiis, cuius meruisti connubio copulari».

¹¹⁴ 3ECI 18, p. 2276: «Ipsius dulcissimae matri adhaereas, quae talem genuit Filium, quem caeli capere non poterant (cfr. 3Re 8, 27), et tamen ipsa parvulo claustrum sacri uteri contulit et gremio puellari gestavit».

¹¹⁵ 3ECI 27, 2277: «In [quo] quidam mundani reges et reginae falluntur, quorum superbiae usque ad caelum licet ascenderint, et caput earum nubes tetigerit, quasi sterquilinum in fine perduntur». Cfr. *Iob* 20, 6-7, but also *Is.* 14, 11-15 cit. in Armstrong, *The Lady* cit., p. 52.

the favours the world had to offer»¹¹⁶. She had accepted, instead, «the most holy poverty». Because of this, by the fourth letter, Clare does not hesitate to define Agnes as «Queen of the heavenly King»¹¹⁷. Agnes does become a queen, but in a far-greater kingdom. Mindful of how the news of Agnes's conversion had rapidly spread around the entire Christian world, which was still reeling in dumbstruck amazement, Clare then adds that *this* choice, and no other, was truly stupefying «stupenda»¹¹⁸. That is to say, Agnes's choice to marry poverty, rather than Frederick II, had left the entire world literally dumbfounded¹¹⁹.

Close analysis of her letters suggests that the allusions contained therein to the arrogance of rulers, and of one «Caesar» in particular, refer to none other than Frederick II. Any doubt still remaining is due to the necessarily generic nature of such allusiveness and the biblical quotes used. Given, however, the understanding we now have about medieval letters and letter-collections¹²⁰, it is safe to presume that not only Clare, her couriers and Agnes were reading this 'private' correspondence. Because of such a public readership, with Frederick still living and the Hohenstaufens still very much in control of the empire, the allusions in the first three letters are necessarily generic indeed and daring enough. By the time Clare sends her fourth and last letter,

¹¹⁶ *1ECI* 5, p. 2263.

¹¹⁷ *4ECI* 27, p. 2283.

¹¹⁸ *4ECI* 20, pp. 2282-2283. Despite the passage from the 'Vos' ('You' plural used, as in modern French, as a term of respect) in the first letter, to the 'tu' ('you' singular, in a more familiar register) of the remaining three, and the twenty-year period between the first and the last, all scholars agree that the letter-collection presents an effective consistency in style, lexis, terminology, and aim. For Clare as an «excellent artist with words» (my trans.), cfr. Zavalloni, *La personalità di Chiara* cit., p. 69, but also Rotzetter, *Chiara d'Assisi* cit., 259, and Armstrong, *The Lady* cit., p. 20.

¹¹⁹ The term «stupenda» is obviously not to be understood in the modern, positive sense. Its value, rather, is closer to the original Latin, that is, neutral with a negative connotation, as in: 'to leave one dumb, mute'. It denotes not reason for external jubilation, but cause for silent concern. An obvious classical precedent in this sense is Sen. *Phaed.*, 607: «Curae leves locuntur, ingentes stupent» (You can talk openly about light worries; more alarming causes for worry leave you dumbstruck). Cfr. also Dante, *Cv.* IV XXV 5; *Pg* XIX 57, *ibid.* XXXI 127; *Pd* XXIX 57.

¹²⁰ Cfr. G. Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, Turnhout 1976 (Typologie des Sources du Moyen Âge Occidental, Fasc. 17, A-II).

however, it is 1253, Frederick has been dead for nearly three years and his empire lies in rack and ruin. It is only now that Clare can openly declare Agnes to be the «Queen of the heavenly King» thus explicitly teasing out the opposition she had hitherto left implicit between Christ and her former imperial suitor.

The same can be said for Clare's definition of Agnes's choice of poverty as «stupenda». Here, however, the literary game is even more subtle and few others outside strictly Franciscan circles would have been able to notice it at all. Firstly, it must be said that in all of Clare's *opuscula*, the adjectival gerundive *stupenda* is a *hapax legomenon*¹²¹. Occurring only once, here in the fourth and last letter, it is not contained, for example, in the other two catalogues of adjectives used to describe perfect Clarian poverty. That is, it is not contained in the catalogue of the first letter: «O beata paupertas» ... «O sancta paupertas» ... «O pia paupertas»¹²², nor is it in the other catalogue in the fourth letter, which is, not surprisingly, rather similar, that is «beata paupertas, sancta humilitas et ineffabilis caritas»¹²³. If, as most experts on Clare agree, this latter catalogue does represent her doctrine of charisma in a codified, literary form, then here it is poverty that makes one truly 'blessed' «beata». Conversely, hardly a 'bland form of admiration', as it has recently been explained to be¹²⁴, we can conclude that only when implicitly referred to Frederick II is poverty truly 'dumbfounding' «stupenda».

The term *stupenda* may appear only once in Clare's works, but it does not, however, constitute a *hapax* in an absolute sense within the realm of early Franciscan literature. Indeed, it is to this broader literature that we must now turn in order to understand the exact semantic value with which it is endowed in the letter to Agnes of Prague. The term is found in Francis's *opuscula* where, just as in Clare's, it is used *una tantum*. Significant enough as a consideration, the importance of the fact that Francis uses *stupenda* only once is compounded by the concomitant fact that he used it in a highly topical context, the *Epistola toti ordini missa*. This letter, which, as its conventional name suggests, Francis had

¹²¹ Cfr. *Concordantiae verbales Opusculorum s. Francisci et s. Clarae Assisensium*, ed. G.M. Boccali O.F.M., Assisi 1995, p. 747.

¹²² *1ECI* 15, 16, 17.

¹²³ *4ECI* 18.

¹²⁴ See Raurell, *La lettura del "Cantico dei Cantici"* cit., p. 286.

sent to the entire Order in the first few months of 1220, is crucial to Franciscan sensibility *tout court*. It presents, after all, close linguistic and thematic ties with the *Regula non bullata*¹²⁵ and, as such, was memorised, quoted, and held most dearly by all his closest followers¹²⁶. Seeing, moreover, that Clare never strove to found anything new, much less separate herself from Francis's original message and charisma as certain historiography still likes to posit, and seeing that she simply endeavoured to live out what Francis had directly decreed she do, we must always keep in mind that the *Epistola toti ordini missa* had also been sent *to her*. Despite the reiterated attempts within and without the Order to distance her from the core of the Franciscan movement, she was and remained, notwithstanding, an integral, *original* part of it. She must have felt, therefore, to be as legitimate an addressee of the letter as any other Franciscan¹²⁷.

Within this letter, addressed also to Clare, the term *stupenda* is to be found in a context in which Francis speaks about the holiness of the priestly function, no matter how unworthy of respect any individual priest may seem to be to other men. Apparent unworthiness of certain church members was often used by religious movements right throughout the Twelfth century to justify their decision *not* to respect the hierarchy of the Roman Church. This very point, however, soon became a definition in itself of blasphemy and heresy in more than one papal bull. Not only a way of differentiating himself from heretics, Francis, instead, never grew tired of reminding his brethren that respect for the priestly function was simply due, regardless¹²⁸. Much more importantly, it was also a question of divine humility. That is to say, by divine unction, no one but a legitimately-ordained

¹²⁵ For a discussion of the various titles under which the letter is presented in the manuscript tradition, cfr. Hoeberichts, *Francis' Letter* cit., pp. 1-8. For its resemblance to the *RnBu*, cfr. *ibid.* p. 81.

¹²⁶ For its dating and importance, cfr. *Fontes* cit., p. 20.

¹²⁷ For the transmission of this precious text directly from the archetype of the ms. 338 Assisiense with concomitant ramifications for Clare's knowledge of it through, and discussion of it with, brother Leo, cfr. E. Menestò, M. Bassetti, *Ancora sul ms. 338 della Biblioteca Comunale di Assisi, «Franciscana»*, 20 (2018), pp. 40-41; R. Lokaj *Una nuova proposta di modello dietro al Cantico di frate Sole alla luce del ms. 338 Assisiense*, forthcoming in «Frate Francesco».

¹²⁸ Cfr. *RnBu*, 19, p. 203; *2EFi*, 33-36, p. 82; *Test.* 7-10, pp. 227-228.

priest, no matter how profligate and vile he may seem to the eyes of others, can create the necessary conditions whereby that daily miracle might occur: Transubstantiation. Recognised as such by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), both ratified and invigorated in liturgical function¹²⁹, and a main point of interest in the bull, *Sane cum olim*, which Honorius III had promulgated in November 1219¹³⁰, the Eucharist was at the very centre of Francis's concerns in the letter he sent to the entire Order early the following year¹³¹. And here, just as in Clare's fourth letter sent to Agnes some twenty years later still, the fact that God should desire to become bread and wine for lowly mankind to quench its spiritual hunger and thirst is precisely what leaves one utterly dumb-founded. Francis had written:

Remember your dignity, my priestly brothers, and be saintly, for He is saintly. And just as the Lord God has honoured you above everyone else because of your ministry, so too must you love, respect and honour Him above everyone else. Oh what great feebleness and mournful weakness it would be if, though holding Him in your very midst, you were to worry about anything else in the entire world. Let every man quake, the whole world tremble and the heavens exult, when above the altar in the hands of a priest there is Christ, Son of the living God! What amazing height and how astonishingly (*stupenda*) worthy He deemed it to be! What sublime humility! What humble sublimity that the Lord of all things, God and the Son of God, should humble Himself and thus conceal Himself in the unassuming guise of bread! Behold, my brothers, the humility of God and pour out your hearts in front of Him. Humble yourselves too so as to be raised up on high by Him.

¹²⁹ *Conc. (Oecum. XII) Lateranense IV 11-30 Nov. 1215*, in *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, edd. H. Denzinger, P. Hünermann, Edizioni Dehoniane, 4th edn., Bologna, 2001, p. 454: «Una vero est fidelium universalis Ecclesia, extra quam nullus omnino salvatur, in qua idem ipse sacerdos est sacrificium Iesus Christus, cuius corpus et sanguis in sacramento altaris sub speciebus panis et vini veraciter continentur, transsubstantiatis pane in corpus et vino in sanguinem potestate divina, ut ad perficiendum mysterium unitatis accipiamus ipsi de suo, quod accepit ipse de nostro. Et hoc utique sacramentum nemo potest conficere, nisi sacerdos, qui rite fuerit ordinatus, secundum claves Ecclesiae, quas ipse concessit Apostolis eorumque successoribus Iesus Christus».

¹³⁰ For this bull, see Hoeberichts, *Francis' Letter* cit., p. 48.

¹³¹ For the *EOrd* dated 1220, cfr. *Fontes* cit., p. 20.

Keep nothing of yourselves, therefore, for yourselves, so that He who reveals Himself entirely unto you may then accept you in your entirety¹³².

Perhaps here even more than elsewhere does Clare reveal that she is somewhat more than just one of the many legitimate addressees of the *Epistola toti ordini missa*. She has understood the spirit and form of Francis's letter and has made them her own. The passage from noun to gerundive in «Magna miseria et miseranda infirmitas», the specular chiasmus «O humilitas sublimis! O sublimitas humilis», and the adjectival gerundives preceding a noun, «miseranda», «admiranda» and our «stupenda», are all integrated into Clare's own writing style. Even in her letter-writing is Clare following Francis as his living memory. Indeed, not only is she a veritable cultural force keeping the original values of Franciscanism soundly anchored to the very source of Apostolic authority, but she also knows how to use a literary strategy to preserve and propagate Francis's own words and most intimate thoughts.

Furthermore, Clare appropriates Francis's style not only in grammar and morphology, but also as lexis. Francis had used the term «stupenda» to designate and qualify the noun «dignatio», which has been recently translated into English, and rather felicitously we might add, as 'humanity'¹³³. «Dignatio», therefore, described Christ's deigning to descend towards the flesh. Clare, respectful of the Franciscan spirit, but maintaining, as always, a slight margin of autonomy, uses it to designate and qualify the noun «paupertas». In both cases, however, the semantic sphere is identical inasmuch as both terms, now re-qualified, refer to the one process of descending,

¹³² *EOrd*, p. 101: «Videte dignitatem vestram, fratres sacerdotes, et estote sancti, quia ipse sanctus est. Et sicut super omnes propter hoc ministerium honoravit vos Dominus Deus, ita et vos super omnes ipsum diligite, reveremini et honorate. Magna miseria et miseranda infirmitas, quando ipsum sic praesentem habetis et vos aliquid aliud in toto mundo curatis. Totus homo paveat, totus mundus contremiscat, et caelum exsultet, quando super altare in manu sacerdotis est Christus, Filius Dei vivi! O admiranda altitudo et **stupenda dignatio**! O humilitas sublimis! O sublimitas humilis, quod Dominus universitatis, Deus et Dei Filius, sic se humiliat, ut pro nostra salute sub modica panis formula se abscondat! Videte, fratres, humilitatem Dei et effundite coram illo corda vestra; humiliamini et vos, ut exaltemini ab eo. Nihil ergo de vobis retineatis vobis, ut totos vos recipiat, qui se vobis exhibet totum» (my trans.).

¹³³ Hoeberichts, *Francis' Letter* cit., p. 34.

transubstantiation in the case of Christ, social descent in the case of Franciscan and Clarian *Minoritas*. For sure, the chronological framework implicit in the respective contexts differs. An awe-struck Clare refers to the Incarnation of Christ as that one lucky time in history in which He became visible Man¹³⁴. The ecstatically reverent Francis, on the other hand, refers to the daily re-enactment of that event in the Eucharist, in that mystical, invisible process, that is, in which His Spirit descends to become bread and wine. Indeed, the Eucharist is even *structurally* central to Francis's letter¹³⁵. Though placing their emphasis on different facets, the factor binding Francis and Clare inextricably together remains, however, the fact that they both remain literally dumbfounded, *stupiti*, by the process in itself. The creator of the entire universe, the leader of veritable hosts of angelical armies, the all-powerful God, by the love He felt for miserable humanity, which was made from dust and was therefore destined to return to dust, decided to descend from the heavens and become Man Himself only to die ignominiously on the cross. And why? To save *us* from greater death¹³⁶. To descend willingly and gladly from on high, in order to embrace the lowly just as willingly and gladly – *this* is the truly stupefying paradigm of «sublime humility» of which Francis is speaking. *This* is also the same paradigm of «holy humbling» which Clare makes her own, even in her future Rule¹³⁷, and which she instantly recognises and so sincerely applauds in Agnes's 'great refusal' to become the wife of an emperor of dust. Christ's loving act of humbling Himself is not only what leaves Francis and Clare both intimately awe-struck and dumbfounded. It is also what binds their respective writing styles so intimately together.

¹³⁴ Cfr. Acquadro & Mondonico, *La Regola di Chiara* cit., p. 149: «amor stupito per il mistero dell'incarnazione».

¹³⁵ Hoeberichts, *Francis' Letter* cit., pp. 9-11, 24, 84.

¹³⁶ Both Francis and Clare contemplated this divine 'humbling' or saving kenosis, as in the Pauline locus contained at *Phil.* 2, 7, with true amazement. On this point, cfr. *Il Vangelo come Forma di vita. In ascolto di Chiara nella sua Regola*. Federation S. Clare of Assisi of the Poor Clares of Umbria and Sardinia, Padova 2007, p. 440.

¹³⁷ *ReCl* 10, 10, p. 2304: «habere humilitatem». For a discussion of such *humilitas*, cfr. *Il Vangelo come Forma di vita. In ascolto* cit., p. 440.

Epilogue

In the broader picture of mid-thirteenth-century religious writings and the use of such 'stupefying' terminology, a strong dichotomy is thus established between Agnes of Prague, the emblem of Clarian charisma, and Frederick II, the emblem of worldly arrogance. Given that the underlying motif of Clare's letters is opposition, it follows, then, that the 'stupefying poverty' «stupenda paupertas» demonstrated by the illustrious Agnes in her decision to mirror Christ's descent into the flesh should also have an inversely proportional counterpart in Frederick II's stultifying ascent to the firmament. And it does. Just over a year before Clare writes her fourth, and last, extant letter to Agnes, Frederick II had already become known throughout all those quarters of the Church hostile to him as *stupor mundi* – the man who had left the world in utter awe. The epithet, however, 'wonder of the world', coined by Matthew Paris, was not positive, as modern tradition would purport, and had even been used beforehand with open sarcasm¹³⁸. It rather described the general situation ensuing after Frederick's death in which, with the empire in tatters, all its grandiose dreams dashed, and Frederick II's fathomless arrogance proven to be vacuous, his former subjects were still reeling in shock and disbelief¹³⁹.

Though not considered by posterity as a great historian, Matthew Paris was nevertheless revered in his own lifetime as an important figure, and so was his masterpiece. There is no evidence to suggest that his *Chronica majora* ever crossed over the rickety threshold at Saint Damian's or even made it to Umbria at all in Clare's lifetime. We do know, however, that, in only a few years of Frederick's death, news of Matthew's views of him, including the famous epithet *stupor mundi*, travelled around Christendom like wildfire reaching the ears of the learned for and against the empire, perhaps even brother Leo's own and, through him, Clare's. For sure the courts of Europe too would have heard such

¹³⁸ Cfr. Delle Donne, *Federico II* cit., p. 57.

¹³⁹ For a re-definition of and bibliography for Mathew Paris' disparagingly satirical epithet *stupor mundi et immutator mirabilis*, see Brugnoli, *Stupor mundi* cit.; R. Lokaj, *Stupor mundi* re-addressed, «Critica del testo», 12/2-3 (2009), pp. 113-21; Delle Donne, *Federico II* cit., pp. 20, 57; Francesconi, *Storia, profezia, mito* cit., p. 842.

news, and Prague, though distant, was no different. To the contrary, keenly interested in imperial politics, the Přemyslide court, including the now cloistered Agnes, would have been very sensitive indeed towards such treatment *post-mortem* of the man who could easily have been their finest son-in-law, brother-in-law, indeed husband¹⁴⁰.

So, was Clare's «stupenda», supported linguistically and programmatically by Francis' own, polemically prompted by Mathew's «stupor»? Is the epilogue to Frederick's plight of 'social ascent = spiritual descent' intertextually meant to be seen as specularly counterposed by Agnes' own model of 'social descent = spiritual ascent' in true Franciscan fashion? The question is obviously to be left *sub judice*. However, with diametrically opposing aspirations meeting in a marriage contract destined never to be countersigned, much less consummated, the script and its language cryptically alluding to the very characters described therein were indeed already available, just waiting for Clare to display and deploy throughout her own brief but burning letters, no one's handmaid or tender sapling anymore.

¹⁴⁰ For the attempt to poison Frederick II as merely legendary, cfr. Abulafia, *Frederick II* cit., pp. 338-39. On how the Franciscans at Paris reacted with incredulity to such a sudden death, cfr. G. Potestà, *Maestri e dottrine nel xiii secolo*, in *Francesco d'Assisi e il primo secolo* cit., pp. 307-336, partic. p. 314. For the period as recounted by Mathew Paris, cfr. Delle Donne, *Federico II* cit., pp. 37-38, & Francesconi, *Storia, profezia, mito* cit., p. 845.